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Montaigne

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# PREFACE

*So many books have been written about Montaigne that in one way it is quite unnecessary to add to these. But a new book, whether good or bad, on a great subject has, for a few weeks, an advantage over all old books, in that it is an advertisement. The* Essays *are not widely read in England; at least such is my experience. Among ordinary people, for whom they are pre-eminently written, I have rarely met anyone who knows Montaigne as Montaigne declared that he knew his favourite Plutarch, "inwardly." I am not a Montaigne scholar; I have read very few books about him, but for twenty years I have read and studied the* Essays. *When, a year or more ago, a friend said to me, apropos of a fine essay on Montaigne in* The Times Literary Supplement *by Virginia Woolff (since republished in her book* The Common Reader*): "I must read Montaigne; he sounds like another Proust" — I thought that perhaps the time had come for a fresh advertisement. In writing it I have been haunted by that sentence of his, "I would*

*willingly come from the other world to give him the lie that should represent me other than I had been," and I can only hope that this has kept me from committing any outrageous disturbance of his wise spirit.*

*Florio's translation of the* ESSAYS *is the basis of the translation of the passages which I have quoted. But, as Florio's Elizabethan English is not only full of redundancies, but in many places is obscure and in others is an incorrect translation of the French, this has been considerably revised, and I have to thank Mr. R. C. Trevelyan for all such revision.*

*The order of the essays in the first book is that which the most recent editions have adopted, namely that which numbers the essay "That the Savour of Goods or Evils greatly depends on the opinion we have of them" (No. 40 in Florio) as No. 14 and which consequently makes No. 14 in Florio No. 15, No. 15 in Florio No. 16, and so on, as far as No. 40, which in the new order is "Reflection concerning Cicero." This was the order in the original 1580 edition, but for some unknown reason the 1595 edition altered the original order. To facilitate reference the chapter headings of the three books are given below.*

*I. C. W.*

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MONTAIGNE

## CHAPTER I

### *The Design of the Essays*

THE best-known aspect of Montaigne is that which represents him as a sage in a tower, pleasantly and never arduously engaged in the writing of essays, the main subject of which was himself. " All the world may know me by my book and my book by me " (III, 5) is an oft-quoted sentence of the *Essays* and one upon which the popular idea of him rests. His tower and his library are a *mise-en-scène* as inseparable from him as the cell, the hour-glass, and the lion of Dürer's engraving are from St. Jerome. It would be a mistake to dismiss this picture as an uncharacteristic one. Montaigne was essentially a picturesque person: it is not merely superficial observation which has found him so. All his life he made gestures, such as the retreat to the Tower, the adoption of the device " *Que sçais-je?* " and the emblem of the balance, in order to emphasize to himself and other people a point of view he had taken, and by which he wished to be known. The design of the *Essays* itself was a great gesture, proclaiming Montaigne's unabashed determination

to portray himself as truly as he could, and challenging the notion that only "rare and famous men" could choose themselves as a subject to write of.

But Montaigne's picturesque aim "to portray himself with a pen," to make his book "consubstantial with its author," was not at bottom artistic but moral. There was a stern purpose in his self-portraiture. It was the means of self-knowledge. Only by self-knowledge, as Socrates, the Stoics, and the Epicureans all alike insisted, could a man come to govern his life. Montaigne was above all things a moralist. This fact has been so often neglected that anyone who reads the *Essays* for the first time is likely to be bored, in beginning them, by their moral flavour, especially as in the first book there is very little avowed self-portraiture to make up for this. The pleasant expectation of reading a genial personal record, franker too in some respects, one has been told, than modern taste allows, finds nothing to satisfy it in the early essays, which are little more than moral discourses and patchworks of ancient authors. There are few people nowadays who want to fortify themselves against the idea of death, or whose thoughts dwell naturally upon such themes as "That to philosophize is to learn how to die." The tendency to moral discourse soon gives place to that haphazard mixture of self-analysis, comment upon affairs and human nature, which is the character-

istic " essay." But the moral tone remains and the moral attitude is always there, and it is surprising that it has been so little emphasized, in comparison with the attention that has been given to the picturesque, self-revelatory parts. More people of course read the two later books than the first book of the *Essays;* and of the later essays, those revealing so many and often trivial details of Montaigne's personal habits are no doubt the most entertaining. But Montaigne did not write to entertain; neither was self-portraiture his sole object. It was a stroke of genius on his part to conceive a picture of himself as a means of stressing the moral necessity of self-examination and self-knowledge, and as a means of communicating to the world at large the moderate, detached, and what now strikes us as essentially sensible point of view which he held on most subjects. That design ensured attention, and eventually, in the political field, acceptance, for ideas that otherwise had not much chance of being listened to, badly as the world, and France in particular, needed them. Just as Mr. Bernard Shaw can popularize, or at least accustom public opinion to hearing views it certainly needs to hear, but just as certainly would not listen to but for Mr. Bernard Shaw's inimitable way of presenting them and himself with them, so Montaigne, by the novelty of his " wild, extravagant " design and the success of its achievement, popularized the ideas of moderation

and tolerance, and helped to give them an influential place in the religious politics of his country. The combination of an artistic design and a moral purpose has rarely, if ever, been so successful. Common-sense wisdom has rarely been presented so effectively. When an artist and a moralist unite in one person, the literary result is not usually satisfactory. But it was so in the case of Montaigne, whose remarkable gesture was the means of stamping a purely common-sense wisdom in respect of politics, morals, religion, and general human conduct with a unique distinction, that of issuing from what was then " the only book of its kind in the world."

I do not suggest that Montaigne deliberately conceived design and purpose as means and end respectively. It is clear enough from the *Essays* that when he began to write he had no very conscious end in view. He wrote, he said, to amuse himself or to keep in order the thoughts and fancies that thronged his mind.[1] These explanations are but the

[1] " It is not long since I retired myself unto mine own house, resolved, as much as in me lay, not to trouble myself with aught else except to pass in repose and solitude the little that remained of my life; it seemed to me that I could do my mind no greater service than to allow it complete idleness to commune with itself and to pause and compose itself; which I hoped it might thenceforth do the more easily having become with time more weighty and

stories people tell themselves or their readers when at bottom they write because they must. Later on, the idea of portraying himself occurred [2] and finally absorbed Montaigne completely, though even in this later stage he was always casting about for reasons to justify so much self-absorption, at one moment condemning the vanity of it,[3] at another suggesting that his account of himself might act not as an example but as a deterrent,[4] which shows how essentially a moralist he was. An artist pure and simple would not have been bothered with such

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more ripe. But I find that contrariwise, playing the runaway horse, it allows itself a hundred times more activity for itself than it did for others, and begets in me so many chimeras and fantastical monsters, one after the other, without order and without reason, that, in order to contemplate at leisure their foolishness and strangeness, I have begun to keep a register of them, hoping in time to make my mind ashamed of them." (I, 8.)

[2] "It was a melancholy humour . . . that first put into my head this idea of writing; and then, finding myself wholly unprovided, and void of any other matter, I presented myself unto myself for argument and subject." (II, 8.)

[3] See beginning of III, 9.

[4] "But whereas honest men benefit the public by causing themselves to be imitated, I shall haply benefit by causing myself to be evitated. If I publish and accuse my imperfections some man may learn to fear them. . . . There may be some of my temperament who are better

considerations. It was the intensity and sincerity of his desire to communicate himself that evoked the idea of a portrait as the most graphic description of his aim.[5]

Yet it is only in a very wide sense that the *Essays* can be called a portrait. The simile chosen by Montaigne is only a simile and hides rather than points out the true scope of his book. There is of course a core of strict portraiture in it, but its real subject is something which is unportrayable. The picturesque parts of the *Essays*, Montaigne's description of his appearance, surroundings, tastes,

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instructed by contrariety than by similitude, and more by avoiding than by following. The elder Cato had this kind of teaching in view when he said that wise men have more to learn of fools than fools of wise men." (III, 8.)

[5] Being at Bar-le-duc he saw a picture which the King of Sicily had painted of himself, presented to King Francis the Second, and asks: "Why is it not equally lawful for every man to portray himself with his pen, just as he portrayed himself with a pencil?" (II, 17.) "Yes, but I shall be told that this design of using oneself as a subject to write of might be excused in rare and famous men, who by their reputation had caused in others some desire for their acquaintance. . . . This admonition is most true, but it concerneth me very little. I erect not here a statue to be set in the market-place of a town, or in a church, or in a public square. It is for the corner of a library, and to amuse a neighbour, a kinsman, or a friend who may find pleasure in renewing acquaintance and

habits, are not the most characteristic passages. It may be because of these that the *Essays* are popular; it is not because of these that they are unique. They are unique because of their grasp and display of the truth, not only in statement but in manner of writing, that the mind, or soul, of man is too complex, too variable, to be portrayed distinctly. All that can be done is incessantly to track its vagaries, to pursue and examine its countless inconsistencies and confusions, thereby the better to be aware of the small universe one is called upon to govern, if one wants happiness, and of the presumption and vanity of supposing that self-government can be prescribed in a few conventional laws. " There is no description so hard, nor so profitable, as is the description of oneself." " It is a thorny enterprise, and more so than it appears, to follow so vagabond a path as that of our spirit; to penetrate the dense shades of its inmost windings; to choose and lay hold of all the slight breaths of its agitations. 'Tis a new and extraordinary amusement, that withdraws us from the common occupations

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familiarity with me through this picture. Others have been emboldened to speak of themselves because they have found there a worthy and rich subject; I, contrariwise, because I have found it so sterile and meagre that no suspicion of ostentation can attach to it. I find not so much good in myself but I may speak of it without blushing." (II, 18.)

of the world, ay, and from the most recommended." (II, 6.) "Whosoever looketh into this narrowly hardly ever finds himself twice in the same state. . . . If I speak diversely of myself, it is because I see myself diversely. All contrarieties are found in me at some moment and in some fashion. Bashful, insolent; chaste, lustful; talkative, taciturn; laborious, delicate; witty, dull; melancholy, gay; lying, truthful; learned, ignorant; both liberal and avaricious and prodigal. All these things I perceive in myself in some degree according as I turn myself about." (II, 1.)

The diversity of human nature, the inconstancy of our actions, the uncertainty of our judgment, the curious, inexplicable, essentially unreasonable foundations of our opinions, these are Montaigne's favourite themes. He recurs to them over and over again, as he sits in his library turning over the pages of his books, and jotting down the musings of his mind, the *Essaies,* or *Assayes,* of his judgment. "I chiefly depict my cogitations, a shapeless subject, which cannot fall within the compass of a workmanlike production: only with much ado can I confine it down within this airy body of the voice." (II, 6.) His cogitations led him over a wide field, the field of his reading (wide for those days, his library consisted of a thousand books and he was an indefatigable though impatient reader), of his experience and observation as a courtier, politi-

cian, lawyer, and country gentleman, of the illimitable and, as he grew older and more and more absorbed in his *Essays,* the increasingly fascinating field of his self.[6] The then recent discovery of the New World, upsetting all traditional views of the size and geography of the universe — those marvellous, rich cities in the Indies, were no more alluring to the curiosity and imaginations of the Old World

[6] "I expose my entire self. . . . It is not my deeds that I write; it is my self, it is my essence. I am of opinion that a man must be very prudent in estimating himself, and equally conscientious in declaring his estimate, be it low, be it high, indifferently. If I were to seem to myself good and wise or nearly so, I would proclaim it at the top of my voice. To speak of yourself as less than you are is folly, not modesty. To account yourself as less than you are worth is cowardice and pusillanimity, saith Aristotle. No virtue is helped by falsehood, and truth is never a matter of error. . . . To be overweeningly pleased with what one is, and so to fall into indiscreet love with oneself, is in my conceit the substance of this vice. The best remedy for its cure is to do clean contrary to that which those prescribe who, in forbidding a man to speak of himself, do consequently forbid him to think of himself. . . . If any be drunken with his own knowledge, looking at those beneath him, let him turn his eyes towards past ages, and he will lower his horns; for there shall he find many thousand spirits who tread him down under their feet. If he should enter into any flattering presumption of his own valour, let him call to remembrance

than were the unexplored regions of the soul to Montaigne. He was the great adventurer into man's inner life, that perpetually extending, perpetually bewildering territory, which one may spend one's life exploring and yet never fully know. His discoveries do not seem profound to this knowing age, but no one has ever so graphically conveyed the immensity and perplexity of the enterprise of self-knowledge nor framed a morality more in harmony with that sense which he had of the complexity and unfathomableness of the soul.

The word " morality " is used here in its widest sense, as applying to the whole field of human conduct. It is necessary to say this because otherwise it might be understood as applying only to conduct in matters of sex. People have a way of talking as if this were so, ignoring the wider meaning that belongs to it, and which the word " moral-

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the lives of Scipio and of Epaminondas, of so many armies, of so many nations which leave him so far behind them. No particular quality shall make him proud who shall at the same time take into account so many imperfect and weak qualities that are in him, and finally the nullity of the human state. Because Socrates had alone seriously digested the precept of his God, to know himself, and by that study had come to contemn himself, he alone was esteemed worthy of the title of Sage. Whosoever shall so know himself, let him boldly make himself known by his own mouth." (II, 6.)

ist" still has in ordinary speech. The fact that Montaigne has been described by many writers as "licentious," in view of certain admissions of laxness in sex matters which he makes, has for many people disposed of the whole question of his "morality," as if morality and continence were one and the selfsame thing. Such, of course, was the point of view of the strict moralists of the last century, and it is the persistence and prevalence of this point of view which is the chief reason why the study of Montaigne's moral outlook as a whole has been neglected, and its sincerity and harmony with his intellectual attitude overlooked. It is difficult otherwise to explain how a few admissions, which taken by themselves suggest that Montaigne in sex matters did not practise what he preached in the way of self-control and self-government, should have been taken over-seriously and allowed to nullify the far more obvious and continuous impression which the *Essays* give of real gravity of character and moral disposition. They have been so taken, with the result that it is generally accepted that Montaigne was generally licentious and moreover unblushingly so. Most of the nineteenth-century English writers on Montaigne are on this account never quite at ease in their enthusiasm for him and cannot bring themselves to reconcile his genius with his supposed licentiousness. Bayle St. John, for instance, the author of a useful biography, the

fruit of much study and research, published in 1857, was led to reflect, on visiting the Château of Montaigne: " After all, what has he done that we should visit his library as a saint's shrine? Have we not substituted the idolatry of genius for the idolatry of virtue, and is this progress? " One is tempted to reply that there may be some progress in trying to substitute a love of truth for the love of humbug, and that Montaigne's admissions, upon which the charge against him of licentiousness rests, were directed to this end and against the immorality of professing a morality which human nature, even the wisest, could not act up to. " ' I wot not what books are, nor what they mean by wisdom and philosophy,' quoth the courtesan Lais, ' but sure I am those kinds of people knock as often at my gates as any other men.' " (III, 9.) " Let us aim at less and pretend less, and perhaps our professions and our actions may be less far apart." The key-note of Montaigne's morality, in sex matters as in other respects, was the note of moderation, of tolerance, of compromise. His ways of looking at the world and at himself were identical. He saw that there are as many warring elements in the individual as there are in the community, and that the way of arriving at individual well-being, as at communal well-being, was by a careful balance of claims, keeping close to human nature and not exacting from it what it could not give. His

was an essentially empirical morality, based on reason and experience, accommodated to human nature, and tolerant, some people may think almost insultingly tolerant, of its weaknesses and needs. Montaigne was no hero. His greatness, or it would be better because less paradoxical to say his worth, lies in his knowledge of that fact. He knew himself and he knew he was not heroic. " I account myself of the common sort," he says; and it is his recognition of this with all its implications which gives him his value.

" ' Recognition,' " the strict moralist may interrupt, " ' recognition ' is too mild a word to use. ' Acceptance ' would be nearer the truth as a description of Montaigne's attitude towards his own weaknesses. He recognizes them certainly, we grant you that, and are prepared to admire his honesty of acknowledgment. But there we stop, and can only deplore that a man who knew himself so well took the line that he did of accepting himself in consequence and of proclaiming that, though if he could make himself anew he would make himself different, since he could not do that, he was not going to pretend to any repentance." " As for me, I may desire in general to be other than I am; I may condemn and be displeased with my character as a whole and beseech God to grant me an entire reformation, and excuse my natural weakness; but that, it seems to me, I ought not to term repent-

ance, any more than my displeasure at being neither angel nor Cato. My actions are governed by and conformed to what I am and to my condition; and repentance doth not properly concern such things as are not in our power; though indeed regret doth. I may imagine infinite natures that are loftier and better governed than mine; yet do I not thereby amend my faculties; just as neither my arm nor my wit become more vigorous by conceiving some other who is so. . . . When I consult with my old age concerning the proceedings of my youth, I find that I usually conducted them with discretion according to my opinion. That is all my resistance is able to perform. I flatter not myself: in like circumstances I should ever be the same. It is not a spot, but rather a whole dye that stains me." (III, 2.)

But this very passage, in which Montaigne rejects the idea of repentance in connexion with what is not in his power to alter, quite clearly implies that up to the limits of his powers he resisted his weaknesses; and there are numerous passages in the *Essays*, not to speak of the whole trend of them, which go to show that he did, and with success. In this famous chapter, "Of Repentance," about which he is so often taken to task, he is attacking not only that unreal repentance, "superficial, partial, and ceremonial," he calls it, which actually results in no correction of the sin repented of, but its

fellow, the affectation of " repenting " of those actions in which, as far as in one lay, one did the best one could. " I teach not, I relate," he says; and therein lies the great distinction between him and other moralists. Most moralists avoid the relating part of their duties. The delight of preserving, when one is giving advice, the image in another of oneself as a person who has been able to follow it, is a subtle temptation; and because it is nearly always yielded to, it renders nine-tenths of the moral advice which is given dangerous. To veil delicately how things really stand with oneself is a form of treachery to those one tries to help. They have a right not only to one's genuine judgment as to what is good and bad, but to know how far one has been able to follow one's judgment. Then they know where they are when they fail and when they succeed. The impression that most moralists give is that they live, it is true, in a world full of base temptations which may at times prove very strong, but also full of people (all those their readers look up to) who have succeeded in overcoming them. This is a lie and a very pernicious one. The shock which many people get in reading Montaigne, their proneness to think that his outlook is so lax as to be almost immoral, is a measure of the extent to which this lie has been, even by normally honest people, ignored. It is this lie to which Montaigne's whole nature is so averse that he never in so many words enunciates

it: [7] the contrary truth is so much a part of him, so fundamental to his thought, that it can only be gathered from the whole portrait. Not that Montaigne was much concerned to advise others: he was chiefly concerned to be true to himself. "I do myself more injury in lying than I do to him about whom I lie," he said. (II, 17.) The passion to be true to himself carried him to a degree of self-acceptance which seems sometimes excessive; but it must be remembered, as Montaigne says, that "When all is told, a man never talks of himself without loss. Self-condemnations are ever in-

[7] Unless perhaps in the passage (III, 9) where he says: "We are far enough from honest men according to God; we cannot be such according to ourselves. Human wisdom could never attain to the duties it had prescribed unto itself, and had it ever attained to them, it would have prescribed for itself others beyond them, to which it might ever aspire and pretend; so great an enemy to consistence is our nature. Man doth ordain unto himself to be necessarily in fault. He is not at all skilful at measuring his duty according to another existence than his own. To whom prescribes he that which he expects no one will perform? Is it wrong for him not to do that which it is impossible for him to do? The laws which condemn us not to be able, condemn us because we are not able. At the worst this deformed liberty to present ourselves in two aspects, our actions after one fashion, our discourses after another, may be lawful for them that describe things; but it cannot be so for them that describe themselves, as I do. I must walk with my pen as I walk with my feet."

creased, self-praises decreased" (III, 8); and, further, that his own admitted continual endeavours to govern himself do not argue the immoderate self-acceptance which some of his sayings, taken singly, suggest.

Montaigne had his occasional lapses from sincerity; he had his vanity, and his determination to portray himself and his imperfections to the life was not wholly devoid of this; but as a whole the *Essays* are quite remarkably free from impudence and without any sentimentality, faults which are not easily resisted by a writer who takes himself as his subject-matter. Imagine what in this age, with its relish for candour (which is not the same thing as sincerity) and avidity for disillusionment, a modern Montaigne might produce! From such an over-individualized, over-self-conscious production, with its rather awful revelations and intimacies, one turns to the *Essays* and realizes how much more impersonal than personal they are, how much less a portrait of Montaigne than a picture of man. Montaigne's work shows many of the qualities of Renaissance art. There is that sincerity and reserve which seem to go with the workman while he is still aware of difficulties in his subject-matter or material and has not yet become sophisticated. Montaigne's sincerity, his respect for the task he had set himself, his abiding sense of the mystery of the soul, kept him within the bounds of sincere art and gave to his

"portrait" its universal character. There is an æsthetic quality in his scepticism. His refusal to dogmatize, his "*Que sçais-je?*" sprang from an uncertainty as to the limits of human nature which he had actually *felt* while trying to portray himself. His whole morality is of a piece with this deeply felt uncertainty. He is as humble before the soul's unruliness as Zophar was before the incomprehensibleness of God. "Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know?" So Montaigne on the volubility of the soul: "Our spirit is a vagabond. . . . We bridle and strangle it with religions, with laws, customs, learning, precepts, punishments and rewards, mortal and immortal; yet we see that, by its volubility and changeableness, it escapes all these bonds." (II, 12.) He had a reeling sense of the soul's inconstancy; his sentences, his manner of writing often mirror it. He seems to be dizzily aware of a flux within. "All is but change, and inconstancy: we go not, we are carried like things that float, now gently, now violently, according as the water is either stormy or calm. Each day a new fantasy; and our humours move with the movements of the weather. We waver between different opinions; we will nothing freely, nothing absolutely, nothing constantly. . . . Whosoever looketh into this narrowly, hardly ever finds himself twice in the

same state. . . . If I speak diversely of myself it is because I see myself diversely. . . . And whosoever heedfully studies himself, shall find this volubility and discordance in himself, yea and in his very judgment. I have nothing to say about myself entirely, simply, and solidly, without confusion and disorder." (II, 1.)

Hence Montaigne's whole morality. That flux within defies a settled law, codes, conventions. The individual, by himself, must tackle his own maelstrom, must from his own experience derive his own order. Order there must be; and for the multitude probably it is best to keep to the beaten path. "Verily there are few souls so orderly, so strong and well-born that they may be trusted with their own guidance. . . . The spirit is an outrageous glaive, yea, even to its own possessor, for him who knows not how to arm himself therewith orderly and discreetly." The common people snore while they are awake. They feel not themselves, judge not themselves, leave the greatest part of their natural parts idle. They need the support of conventions. But the well-born soul must do without such dependence. Liberty is essential to its expansion: conformity to ready-made rules is safety bought at the expense of the soul's life. Our profession, above all, is to live; to live, not by rote or custom, but continually sensitive to that ever-changing spirit within us, attentive to the soul's waywardness, min-

istering to it or checking it as order, the order of conscience, prescribes. " They have guided their soul to all senses and biases; they have strengthened and underpropped her with all suitable outer help, and have enriched and adorned her with whatsoever they have been able to borrow either within or without the world for her avail. It is in them that the extreme height of human nature doth lodge." (II, 12.) " That is an exquisite life which maintains itself in order even in private. Everyone may play the actor, and represent an honest man upon the stage; but inwardly, and in his own bosom, where all things are lawful for us, where all is concealed, to keep a due rule there, that's the point." (III, 2.)

Montaigne's " conscience " is a very broad-minded one and must be distinguished from the narrow " conscience " of religion. His morality, as before remarked, is essentially rationalistic, and he has no use for precepts which do not work. " Let us follow reason constantly," he says. ". . . Even should I not follow a straight path for its straightness, I would follow it because I have found by experience that at the end of the reckoning it is commonly the happiest and most profitable." ((II, 16.) Elsewhere (III, 12) he speaks of that morality, " held in greater esteem than it deserveth, which is but a slave to precepts, and constrained by hope and fear." " I love it," he continues, " to be such

as laws and religions make not, but perfect and authorize, such as feels that it upholds itself without aid, having sprung up in us from its own roots from the seeds of universal reason, implanted in every man that is not unnatural." By reason, acting upon experience and observation — above all, observation of ourselves — " Cæsar's life hath no more examples for us than our own " — we shall learn to master our inherent instability and achieve, in so far as we can, a balance of the manifold and ever-changing contrarieties within. Balance, moderation, tolerance, respect for the stray impulse, the unexpected emotion, that may at any moment drift in with its claim, acceptance of human nature in all its weaknesses, strengths, and peculiarities, these are the bases of Montaigne's morality, the bases, as it were, of his reckoning, which, because of his innate regard for the miracle-working powers of the soul,[8] he could never bring himself to close. Like a Mohammedan fearful of destroying any scrap of paper lest perchance the name of Allah should be written on it, Montaigne dared not ignore a jot of evidence concerning the waywardness of man. All that he could read and collect of the diversity and variety of human customs, habits, and opinions he reported: he travelled, not, as many people do, " to find Gascons in Sicily," but to seek " Greeks and Persians " there. He was insatiable in pursuit of the

[8] "Man's spirit is a wonderful worker of miracles."

diversity of other men's lives; he was fascinated by the unending list of human vagaries and foibles. The last word could never be spoken: the reckoning must always be left unsummed, and, when all was said and done in the way of discovery, there was the fallibility of one's judgment to be accounted for, the " *Que sçais-je?* " which must be set against all one knew. Montaigne never preaches. He was fond of phrases and words which moderate the boldness of speech: " it may be," " peradventure," " I think." Better, he thought, that we should keep the form of learners until we are sixty years of age than present ourselves doctors at ten! His so-called " scepticism " or " indifference " was to a great extent good manners; good manners, that is to say, in the intellectual sense. The savage fanaticisms of the times, the burning and torturing of heretics, the fierce warfare of one religious sect against another, which had ravaged France for so many years, roused in him the protest, " Who are we, to be so certain that we are right? " " It is an over-valuing of one's conjectures to cause a man to be burned alive because of them." (III, 11.) He indicated rather than laid the foundations of a humane and livable morality in opposition to an inhuman and unlivable one. His ideal was not merely religious toleration but, as has been well said by Bayle St. John, " universal tenderness and mansuetude, the necessity of gentleness of man towards man, the greater value

of your neighbour's little finger than your own most deeply rooted convictions, which may be absurdities."

In the field of religious politics Montaigne's protest has been recognized. Wars of religion have ceased. But the value of our neighbour's little finger, the value even of our own little finger, still counts for very little when nations allow themselves to be dragged into war. As to that " not only most fundamental but noblest of our occupations " — namely, living — Montaigne's wisdom has been barely recognized. People in general are loath to associate common sense with wisdom; they love the sound of lofty aims. Like Naaman, the Syrian, they would rather be told to go wash themselves in the mighty rivers of Damascus than in the modest Jordan near at hand. " The worth of the mind consisteth not in going high but orderly," says Montaigne. " Its greatness is not exercised in greatness; in mediocrity it is." (III, 2.) His invincible good sense is not amazing or exciting to study, but he is more beneficent than most heroes. The times are riper for the understanding of him than they were. Tired of heroics, we may well turn to Montaigne: defender of cheerfulness, champion of sincerity, enemy of overstrained idealisms, who loved pleasure and spontaneity, and hated avoidable sorrows and glooms, (believing that most were avoidable if facts were faced squarely), and was indulgent to human nature and to himself.

## CHAPTER II

### *Boyhood and Youth*

MICHEL EYQUEM, who afterwards called himself Montaigne, was born at his father's château of Montaigne in Perigord in 1533. It is not idle to mention that the sack of Rome had taken place five years before. Something of what that momentous event, and all that led up to it, stood for in the history of western-European civilization can be seen in the way in which the then recent discovery of Italy influenced even a French squire's up-bringing of his son.

Perhaps the nearest modern parallel to the sixteenth-century discovery of Italy is the nineteenth-century discovery of Europe by Japan. The parallel is a poor one and only worth pursuing as a means of realizing the enormous fertilizing shock of astonishment, curiosity, and wonder produced by the sudden contact of a rude and imaginative young nation with an older civilized world. At the end of the fifteenth century, while English nobles could scarcely read or write, and western Europe was still fettered by the feudalism and ecclesiasticism of the

Middle Ages, Italy, where feudalism had never taken hold, was a free and enlightened country, with political, social, and intellectual habits of thought, akin to those of to-day. Her towns were civic communities. Her lands were free from feudal bondage, and cultivated much as they are now by peasants, not serfs. Her commerce was flourishing; her intellectual life emancipated from the stagnant abstractions of the Middle Ages. In short, Italian thought was clear, scientific, and sceptical, as we in modern times understand those words. The rest of Europe, compared with Italy, was barbarous; there the Middle Ages lingered. The Renaissance awaited the armies of Charles VIII, Louis XII, and Francis I beyond the Alps.

This is not the place to digress upon the moral corruption of Italy at this period; as staggering and fascinating to its foreign invaders as its outward polish and magnificence, but not as transmissible, at any rate at first. The French in time, during their long Italian wars and after their court had become Italianized by the intermarriage of their kings with daughters of Italian princes, learnt all that Italy could teach in the way of splendid debauchery; but the first fruits of their invasion were not, as indeed they could not have been, that moral depravity and utter blindness to evil which were the last and most terrible fruits of the Italian Renaissance itself.

The spoils of Italy were greedily pounced upon by her invaders, but the French, Germans, and Spaniards who wasted and pillaged that resplendent country brought back with them more than they then knew. As Vernon Lee writes in a brilliant essay:[1] "Only a vanquished nation can civilize its victors. . . . No amount of colonizing among the vanquished can ever produce the effect of a victorious army, of a whole nation suddenly finding itself in the midst of the superior civilization of a conquered people. . . . The barbarous soldiers of Gaston de Foix, of Frundsberg, and Gonsalvo, were the unconscious bearers of the seeds of the ages of Elizabeth, of Louis XIV, and of Goethe. These stupid and rapacious ruffians, while they wantonly destroyed the works of Italian civilization, rendered possible the existence of a Montaigne, a Shakspere, and a Cervantes." Rapacious they were and destructive, yet not altogether insusceptible. That "*gros garçon,*" Francis I, the French likeness of the English Henry VIII, was seized with the desire to reproduce the intellectual and literary life of Italy at his own court. The king's example was followed; Italian culture, Italian refinements became fashionable, and from that time dates the beginning of that powerful Italian influence which trans-

[1] "The Sacrifice." *Euphorion*, by Vernon Lee. T. Fisher Unwin, 1884.

formed the social customs and above all the art and letters of western Europe.

Pierre Eyquem, the essayist's father, like many another French squire, was with Francis I in Italy for many years before he married and settled down at Montaigne. He was a very worthy gentleman of a family long established in Perigord and with a legend of English connexions, which may easily have been true, seeing that the English once owned the great province of Guyenne, of which Perigord was a part. Much discussion has raged as to whether the family was of bourgeois or noble origin, and Montaigne himself has not helped investigations by pretending that his forbears had lived since time immemorial at Montaigne.[2] As a matter of fact only his father and grandfather had lived there. The family fortune had been made in the Bordeaux fishing industry, and Ramon Eyquem, who bought the château and estate, had no connexion with its earlier seigneurs. But the matter is not of much importance. Few nobles derive from the gods, and trade and nobility were no more incompatible in the sixteenth century than they are now. A merchant stock was, at any rate, a more enlightened one upon which to graft the new culture than that of a feudal lord. Traditions of probity, such as the Eyquems

[2] "It is the place where myself and most of my ancestors were born." (III, 9.)

had and were proud of, were an excellent counterpoise to the growing lack of moral principle spreading from Italy. Montaigne's inherited honesty and independence (his most noticeable characteristics) saved him from infection by the worst elements of Italian influence, and Scaliger's gibe, " His father was a herring-monger," can be met with the retort, " So much the better for Montaigne."

Montaigne has given us a vivid picture of his father, for whom he had the greatest affection and respect. Pierre Eyquem must have been an excellent specimen of a Frenchman of that great transition period, staunch to old-fashioned virtues yet naïvely keen to move with the times. He was a man of great integrity, industry, and public spirit. At one time he was Mayor of Bordeaux, an office of exceptional importance, and he was always a prominent citizen. He delighted in the management of his country estates and made many additions to them. He was not learned, but he assiduously cultivated the society of learned men, and the château was always open to such visitors. The admiration with which learning was then regarded has probably never been surpassed. Scholarship was all-absorbing. That " sublime delusion," as J. A. Symonds somewhere calls it, that culture was the key to eternity, dominated men's minds, at what sacrifice to Italy of her political independence and much else besides, students of the Italian Renaissance know. " He spoke,"

says his son, "little and well, and was wont to mingle his conversation with some ornament taken from books in the vulgar tongue; above all, Spanish. . . . His demeanour was of a gentle, humble, and very modest gravity. He was singularly careful of propriety and decency in his person and clothes, whether on foot or on horseback; he was marvellously scrupulous in keeping his word, and in matters of conscience and religion he leant in general rather towards superstition than towards the other extreme. For a man of small stature, he was full of energy and of an upright and well-proportioned figure, with a pleasant, somewhat swarthy, face. He was adroit and accomplished in all noble exercises. I have seen some canes loaded with lead with which, they say, he exercised his arms, the better to enable him to pitch the bar or the stone or to fence; and shoes with leaden soles which he wore for running and leaping. . . . I have seen him when he was past sixty mock at our agility, leap in his furred gown into the saddle, vault over the table on his thumb, and hardly ever mount to his room without springing up three or four stairs at a time." (II, 2.) Montaigne, though he was small like his father, inherited none of these physical aptitudes, and in the *Essays* he constantly laments this difference and how unfitted he was to take the place of his energetic, enthusiastic father at Montaigne. Michel was the third son, which perhaps explains

why Pierre Eyquem thought himself at liberty to experiment upon his education. Theories of education were rife then; humanist ideals were gaining ground in the West. That noblest and largest of Renaissance ideals, that of the many-sided gentleman, skilled not only in court manners and military exercises but in letters, art, and affairs generally, was beginning to be shaped. Stirred by the new horizons opening on all sides, men's minds were absorbed, and absorbed fruitfully, in the problem of how to fashion a gentleman worthy of that great age. It need not be supposed that Pierre Eyquem had the preconceptions of a Castiglione, or that his sturdy wisdom in any way apprehended the complete ideal which came to perfect expression in that Italian's famous *Courtier,* and later to life in an Elizabethan Sidney and Raleigh. He may have been ahead of his country neighbours in his education of Michel, but he was no more than abreast of his times in determining that his boy should be a sound classical scholar and a gentleman according to his own instinctively gentle and humane ways.

Pierre Eyquem's first wish was that his son should be acquainted and allied with people who stood in most need of him. "He considered," says Montaigne, "that I ought rather to look towards him who holds out his arms to me than towards him who turns his back on me." "And it was for this reason that he chose to hold me at the font per-

sons of the most humble origin in order to bind and attach me to them." " His purpose hath not altogether succeeded ill," adds Montaigne. " I willingly give myself unto the meaner sort, whether it be because there is more glory gotten that way or through natural compassion, which in me is infinitely powerful." The child was sent to be suckled at a village near the château, and he was kept there even after he was weaned, that he might learn simple ways. While he was still at nurse and before he could speak he was put in charge of a German tutor who was a great Latin scholar and knew no French.

" This man, whom my father had summoned for the purpose, and whom he paid very well, had me continually in his arms. There were two others with him, less learned than he was, whose charge was to attend me and relieve him. These never talked to me in any other than the Latin tongue. As for the rest of his household, it was an inviolable rule that neither he himself, nor my mother, nor manservant, nor maidservant, should speak in my company any but those Latin words that each of them had learned in order to prattle with me. It is marvellous what profit they all held therefrom. My father and mother thus learned enough Latin to understand it and acquired the language sufficiently to use it at need, as did also all the other household servants that were most in attendance on me. In short, we were so latinized that some of it over-

flowed into the villages round about, where there are still several Latin names, both for workmen and for their tools, that have taken root through constant use. As for myself, I was more than six years old before I could understand any more French or Perigordin than Arabic; and without art, without book, without grammar or precept, without whipping and without tears, I had learnt just as pure a Latin as my master knew." (I, 26.)

To teach the boy Greek another method, not so successful, was adopted. Pierre seems to have got hold of, or invented, a game in which the declensions and conjugations were tossed backwards and forwards in the same way, says Montaigne, as arithmetic and geometry were sometimes then taught. The father was averse to any kind of compulsion. Michel was never allowed to be shaken or startled out of sleep but was always gently awakened by music, and a special servant was kept for that purpose. In all his childhood he was whipped only twice, " and that very lightly," and never allowed his daughter to be whipped at all. So he grew up with a horror of cruelty. " Of all vices," he says, " there is none I hate more." (II, 11.) " I find that our greatest vices take their ply from our most tender infancy. . . . Some mothers think it good sport to see a child wring off a chicken's neck or take delight in hurting a dog or a cat; and a father may be foolish enough to take it as a good augury

of a martial spirit when he sees his son cruelly beating a peasant or a servant, who does not defend himself, and as a sign of a ready wit when he sees him cheat his fellow by some malicious disloyalty and trickery. Yet these are the true seeds and roots of cruelty, tyranny, and treachery; it is there that they sprout and afterwards shoot up lustily and grow strong through custom." (I, 23.) He so hated deceit that he would never play a game involving it. He tells us how seriously always he played card-games with his wife and daughter, shuffling and handling the cards as earnestly when playing for counters as for ducats. (I, 23.)

Montaigne says that as a child he was slow and dull, and that when he was six years old his father gave up the plan of educating him at home. Pierre Eyquem, it appears, was also discouraged by the criticism of his neighbours, and the Italian pedagogues who had inspired the scheme were no longer by his side. " So," says Montaigne, " the good man, being exceedingly fearful of failing in a matter he had so much at heart," at last gave way to his critics and sent Michel to the College of Guyenne. It was then most flourishing and reputed to be the best in France. Scholars of European reputation were professors there; the great Scotchman George Buchanan, afterwards tutor to James I, but then a political refugee, had Montaigne in his class. The little boy knew Latin so well that his masters were

quite afraid to take him in hand, and Buchanan, meeting Montaigne many years later, told him that in a treatise on education which he was writing he had advocated the plan upon which Montaigne had been brought up. (I, 26.) Pierre Eyquem arranged for his son to have special tutors, but in spite of this the boy's Latin was corrupted, and he tells us that the only advantage he gained from early scholarship was that upon his admittance to the college he was placed in the highest form. Schools were "very prisons of captured youth" in those days; compulsory study went on from dawn to dark, and most of the students brought nothing back from college but a hatred of books. Montaigne's tutor, however, was a wise man and allowed him to indulge his own taste for reading, which, owing to his Latin nurses, was purely classical. At eight years of age he would slip away by himself to read the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, and from Ovid he went on to Virgil's *Æneid*, Terence, Plautus, and Italian plays. Such was the discretion of this kindly master, and "so ingeniously did he behave himself," says Montaigne, that he saw and would not see. "He whetted my hunger, allowing me only by stealth to glut myself on those books, and as to my other regular studies keeping me gently at my task, for the principal qualities that my father sought in those into whose charge he gave me were affability and easiness of temper."

Montaigne tells us this much about his boyhood and school-days in almost the only long piece of autobiographical narrative in the *Essays*. (I, 26.) As to details of his later life we know comparatively little. His allusions to his doings and to events he witnessed or took part in are casual; he rarely parades an experience for its own sake,[3] and though many scholars have been at pains to trace his life in contemporary records, the most that in general they have been able to do has been to identify his references. But this is in keeping with the impression that the *Essays* give of Montaigne's living much more in the reflections he drew from his experiences than in the experiences themselves. He became a lawyer and a member first of the Perigord Court of Aids, and then of the Bordeaux Parliament, both juristic rather than legislative assemblies.[4] It was

[3] Except the honours bestowed upon him, of which he was childishly proud; the collar of the Order of St. Michael, which he received from Charles IX in 1571 and the citizenship of Rome. He had the collar painted on the walls of his chapel and private room in the Tower. The decree admitting him to Roman citizenship is set out in full in the ninth essay of the third book.

[4] Montaigne never cared for the law; he was rather contemptuous of it than otherwise, suggesting that a man ought to be as relieved at losing an action at law as in losing a cough! Upon the efforts of the legal mind to express itself he remarks:

as a Bordeaux councillor that he met the high-minded and serious Étienne de la Boëtie, with whom he formed a friendship which, though shortlived, was the great romance of his life.

De la Boëtie died in 1563 from some kind of pestilence, at the early age of thirty-three. He had already made his mark as a political writer and

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"Wherefore is it that our common language, so easy for any other purpose, becomes obscure and unintelligible in a contract or will; and that he who expresses himself quite clearly in whatever else he says and writes, in law finds no way of declaring himself which does not fall into doubt or contradiction; unless it be that the princes of this art, applying themselves with particular attention to selecting solemn words and shaping artificial clauses, have so weighed every syllable, so scanned every context, that they have become entangled and bewildered by the infinity of figures and minute details that they can no more be reduced to any order and prescription or to any certain understanding? '*Confusum est quidquid usque in pulverem sectum est*' (Whatsoever is divided into dust becomes confused). Whoever has seen children trying to divide a mass of quicksilver; the more they press and work it, and seek to force it to their will, the more they provoke the liberty of that generous metal; it eludes their art and goes diminishing and dispersing itself beyond all reckoning. It is the same here; for by subdividing these subtleties men are taught to multiply their doubts. . . . By sowing and reshaping questions, the world is made to fructify and abound in uncertainty and in quarrelling." (III, 13.)

thinker, though opinions differ as to whether he was as great as Montaigne says he was. The essay "On Friendship" (I, 28) is a touching tribute to his memory, and reveals an emotional side of Montaigne which elsewhere in the *Essays* does not often show itself. It was the fashion in those days to write of friendship in high-flown and mystic language, and Montaigne cannot wholly resist the temptation to pomposity. But his grief is uppermost and breaks through the Platonic embroideries into simplicity, as where he says that he cannot express why he loved his friend but by answering: "*Parce que c'était lui; parce que c'était moi.*" We can afford to smile at his rather pretentious claim that his friendship with La Boëtie deserved a place among the classical friendships of antiquity, for this answer, which is as far as lovers can ever get in explanation of the tie between them, has won for it a more real place in the sympathy and understanding of all times. To the end of his life, Montaigne mourned for his friend, and until in his last years he met Pierre Charron and Marie de Gournay, he found no other kindred soul. He married, but for family and not for romantic reasons. His views on matrimony are distinctly French. He was often at the court of Henry II, and as a young man he probably led no less dissipated a life than most young men of his age and position. Contemporary memoirs give vivid pictures of the magnificence, corruption, and de-

bauchery of the Italianized court, but at the same time Paris was the centre of the new culture and Montaigne was never a mere courtier. He had duties as a councillor of the Bordeaux Parliament to attend to, and though he was always attracted to the brilliant life of Paris, he was too free and independent a spirit to enter whole-heartedly into its intrigues and gallantries and to find any lasting satisfaction therein. He hated the servilities and flatteries of a court atmosphere. He could do nothing, he said, which might enthral him to others. His essay " Of the Inequality that is between us " (I, 42) makes havoc of the myth of the divinity of kings. The graver side of Montaigne, quickened by the six years of friendship with the serious La Boëtie, became dominant after the latter's premature death. The legal profession grew irksome, court pleasures ceased to attract. Even in the heyday of their fascination there had been times when the glitter had faded and death, that great bogy of carnivals, had leered. " There is nothing wherewith I have ever more entertained myself than with imaginations of death; yea, in the most wanton season of my age," Montaigne wrote in one of the essays of his first book. " Among ladies and amusements it was often thought that I was absorbed in meditating upon some jealousy or the uncertainty of some hope, when all the time I was thinking of someone or other who a few days before was surprised by a

burning fever, and by his end as he was coming from just such a feast as I was at, with his head, like mine, full of idle conceits, of love and gaiety." (I, 20.) The suddenness of his friend's death may well have been in his mind while writing this, though it was in no frivolity that De la Boëtie was fatally seized. He seems to have lived and died in almost pedantic seriousness, judged by the standards of to-day. The world was younger then than it is now. Primitive fears were closer. The unknown was more felt. A sense of mortality and a horror of death haunted even the most emancipated minds. Montaigne's essay " That to philosophize is to learn how to die " (I, 20) makes us realize the courage and the novelty of his rationalism. He is addressing and calming his own fears as much as those of his readers, as he writes, splendidly and in the steps of Lucretius, on the naturalness of dying and the necessity of learning to stand and combat Death with a resolute and fearless mind. In three hundred and more years rationalism has done its work. We no longer fear or brood over the inevitable end of life. The eloquence of the Elizabethan Raleigh, whose pen took fire at the thought of death, the nobly worded stoicism of Montaigne, are less needed to-day. Death makes us solemn for a moment when we meet it, but its goblin terrors have been laid.

## CHAPTER III

### *The Tower*

THE Château of Montaigne stands upon a hill overlooking the valley of the Didoire, in Perigord, not far from Bordeaux. It passed out of the possession of Montaigne's descendants early in the last century, and was partially destroyed by fire in 1885, but the Tower was saved and is still kept sacred. Upon the bare rafters of what was once the famous library some of the sentences from the classics and the Bible can be deciphered; others are now illegible. The thousand books he speaks of — " having a thousand volumes of books about me where now I write " — have gone. Montaigne's daughter bequeathed them to a priest upon her death, in 1616, and only a small number have since been recovered. Yet without the books the big circular room, with its three deep-sunk windows overlooking the château and the surrounding country, is at once recognizable from Montaigne's own description.

" I am above the main entry and I see below me my garden, my base-court, my court-yard, and

look into most parts of my house. There I turn over now one book and now another, without order and without method, at piecemeal. Sometimes I muse; sometimes walking up and down I enregister and dictate these fantasies of mine. It is on the third storey of a tower. The first floor is my chapel; the second, a chamber with its apartments, where I often sleep, to be alone. Above that is a great store-room. It was in times past the most useless place in my house. There I pass both most of the days of my life and most of the hours of the day. I am never there a-nights. Next unto it is a neat little room able to have a fire in it in winter, and very pleasantly windowed; and if I feared not the trouble more than the cost, trouble that repels me from all labour, I could easily join to it on each side a gallery a hundred paces long and twelve broad on the same level, having found all the walls raised for some other purpose to the necessary height. Every place of retirement requireth a walk. My thoughts fall asleep if I seat them; my mind goeth not by itself so well as when legs keep it moving. . . . The shape is round, and it hath no flat side but that which serveth for my table and chair; and curving thus, it offereth me at one view all my books, arranged upon shelves in five ranks all round about. It hath three windows, of rich and open prospect, and is sixteen paces wide in diameter. In winter I am less continually there, for my house is perched upon an

hillock, as its name importeth, and hath no room more exposed to the wind than this, which pleaseth me by being rather difficult of access and out of the way, both for the benefit of the exercise in getting to it and for the keeping people away from me. There is my seat. I endeavour to make my rule therein absolute, and to sequester this one corner from the community of wife, of children, and of acquaintance." (III, 3.)

This description is full of significance; the room must have meant a great deal to Montaigne. One can imagine how its actual position and outlook may have helped to shape his vague literary aims. It had been a useless place, a great store-room. Montaigne's father could never have used it, for, if he had, Montaigne, who cherished his father's personal habits and wore his cloak in preference to any other, would certainly have told us so. Its qualities and possibilities must have struck him suddenly when he became master of the château, and he was the kind of man to foster the impression. Wanting to write, undecided as to what form that writing should take, dissatisfied with the part he had led hitherto in public and court life, still more dissatisfied with the state of his country, the Tower room with its wide views and comparative seclusion must have appealed to him. The books which his dead friend had left him were housed there; they were the nucleus of his library; it was partly

through having edited De la Boëtie's works for publication that he had begun to realize his own literary gifts. To a man of restless and indolent nature, aware vaguely of what he may be able to do and much less vaguely of how easily he may be distracted from doing it, a room with character and a bold motto are invaluable props. They exert a moulding pressure; they give out prophecy; in them the uncertain spirit finds just the help which it wants. Montaigne had a Latin inscription, still in part legible, set up in his library. He probably enjoyed contemplating it. It expressed a resolve which he would not have announced so confidently had he felt more sure of its truth.

*In the year of our Lord 1571, aged 38, on the eve of the Calends of March* [*the last day of February*]*, his birthday, Michel de Montaigne, long grown weary of the bondage of courts and public employments, has withdrawn himself altogether into the bosom of the learned virgins. He designs in quiet and freedom from care to spend there the remainder of his life, already more than half passed, and he has dedicated this pleasant ancestral retreat to liberty and repose.*

Thirty-eight is not old, and Montaigne was not worn out by court and public duties as the inscription might make one think. He was merely dissatisfied with his life hitherto, which had been spent partly as a lawyer and councillor in the

Bordeaux Parliament, partly — more largely, probably — at court. The state of affairs in France was dispiriting enough. The country was torn by religious persecution and war. The storm was gathering for the massacre of the St. Bartholomew. The various sects and parties were in complete welter. Catholics, Protestants, republicans, monarchists, all alike were bigoted, fanatical, and persecuting. Toleration was thought impious, and the burning of heretics was a public amusement and a court pastime. The court, plunged in Italian luxury, dabbling in the new culture, cared nothing really for either faith, and in the early days of the Reformation had even affected an interest in reform, as in a new fashion. It is said that the court ladies in the time of Francis I posed as Calvinistic until they learned that the Protestants not only blamed but punished adultery! The wars of religion, flaming so wildly, first in one, then in another district of France, over a period of nearly forty years, differed little from any other wars, ancient or modern, in the relation that their ostensible cause had to the real motives which dominated their leaders. The Church in the sixteenth century was as corrupt and intriguing as the court of Catherine de Medici and her sons; it was the threat to its temporal power and material possessions which roused its fury against the Reformers. Superstition and ignorance in the masses were, as usual, exploited by the am-

bitions and personal enmities of those above them, partisans of the Guises, Valois, and Bourbons. There was little to choose as regards purity of intention between militant Papist, and militant Huguenot. "As for religion, which both put forward," Montaigne is reported to have said to Jacques de Thou concerning the private enmity between the King of Navarre and the Duke of Guise, "'tis a fine pretext to get followers: but religion touches neither one nor the other. Nothing but the fear of being abandoned by the Protestants prevents the King of Navarre from returning to the religion of his forefathers, and the Duke would not have much repugnance to the Confession of Augsburg if he could follow it without prejudicing his interests." [1] The compromise which was finally reached after the death of Henry III in 1589 was illustrative of this observation. "Paris is worth a mass," said the politic Henry, when told, after the battle of Ivry, that Paris would welcome him as Henry IV provided that he became a Catholic.

Montaigne's detachment and disillusionment in 1591 were not sudden or casual. For thirteen years he had been a councillor in the Bordeaux Parliament, a rabidly persecuting body, though not more so than the Huguenots in its neighbourhood; his experience of court life was longer still. Mon-

[1] Jacques de Thou's *Mémoires*.

taigne himself, though professedly a Catholic, had been brought up in a family where members of the two religions lived peacefully side by side. His mother, Antoinette de Louppes, of Jewish origin, was a convert to Protestantism, and two of her children, a younger brother and a sister of Montaigne, were of her faith. Such family circumstances were probably not very unusual, and the natural live-and-let-live domestic solution resulting from them might have been extended into a general policy, had political ambitions not intervened to create strife. Religious toleration as a political theory was certainly unknown, but the common-sense grounds of it were there, grounds becoming more and more fertile for the sowing of moderate principles as the long wars went on. The spirit of moderation, which Montaigne's *Essays* did so much to further, was awake in the country as a natural reaction against the violent extremism which was bringing France to such a plight. It was Montaigne's expression of that spirit, and the ideal form which he found for its expression, that was his great achievement. No mere political propaganda, however vigorous, could have done what the *Essays* did. Political propaganda might have won, as circumstances and the general war-weariness did win, a temporary victory for religious toleration; but Montaigne's book, with its novel form, its lack of pretentiousness, its disarming familiarity of style,

its implicit claim for individual freedom, and its discovery of the complexities of the individual soul, laid, or rather exposed, the sound human bases of a liberal outlook. It advertised not so much the political expediency as the cultural and humanistic importance of moderation, and to an age aspiring so greatly to be civilized made intolerance seem barbarous.

It is not known whether there was any particular immediate cause of Montaigne's retirement from public life in 1571. There may have been, but it is just as probable that he had been inclining that way for some time and that the deciding factors were his father's death in 1568 and his inheritance of the Montaigne estates through the earlier deaths of the two elder sons. He did not actually resign from the Bordeaux Parliament until 1570, but for some time previously his attendance could not have been regular, for he was in Paris seeing to the publication of his translation of a curious conglomeration of arguments in support of Christianity written by Raymond de Sebonde, a Spanish doctor of Toulouse, about a hundred years before. Sebonde's book, which was in a kind of latinized Spanish, had been given to Pierre Eyquem by Bunel, one of the many men of letters who were visitors from time to time at the château, drawn there by its owner's enthusiastic but rather indiscriminate patronage of learning in imitation of Francis I. Luther's ideas

were then gaining ground and Pierre Bunel, shaking his head over these "new fangles" and the "execrable atheism" which he prophesied would be the end of them, had commended the work of this mediæval Paley to his host. Pierre Eyquem, though devoutly religious, did not read the book when it was pressed upon him, but some time afterwards, perhaps because his conscience pricked him for neglect or because he felt doubtful about his son's religious convictions, he requested Michel to translate it into French, which request was promptly performed. "It was a very strange and novel occupation for me," says Montaigne, "but being then by good fortune at leisure and not being able to gainsay in anything the commandment of the best father that ever was, I came to an end of it as well as I could; wherein he took singular delight and ordered it to be printed, which was done after his death." (II, 12.) Another pious labour undertaken by Montaigne after this was the collection of some of the writings of his friend De la Boëtie, for publication. He was in Paris supervising the printing of this edition in the summer and autumn of 1570, and it is suggested by Dr. Armaingaud, Montaigne's latest and most conscientious biographer, that it was from his observations at this time of the sinister forces at work below the surface of the apparently liberal peace of St. Germain, presaging bloody happenings like that of the St. Bartholomew,

that his determination arose to retire at any rate for a time from public and court life. Be that as it may, his awakening literary ambitions made the retirement easier and the bosom of the learned virgins seem more enticing than if he had merely withdrawn from despair at the political scene. We can think of him then as he withdrew to his Tower, pleased at the idea of severing ties with public life that had never been very strong and which had only served of late to bring home to him more and more a sense of the misfitness of one of his detached and moderate outlook amid the extravagant intolerance of the times, with a background of varied experiences behind him and the memory of a rare friendship, which he vaguely aspired to commemorate and to fructify in some work of his own. He must have been by now aware of his potentialities and of the contribution he might make to the thought of the day, if only he could decide on a suitable form. He was vague as to what exactly to write about and how he should write, though evidently friends had made suggestions. " Some would persuade me to write the affairs of my own time, imagining that I see them with a sight less blinded with passion than other men, and at closer quarters, by reason of the access which fortune has given me to the chiefs of different parties." (I, 21.) Others advised him to adopt the then fashionable form of letters. Once he had been an ardent letter

writer,[2] and he admits that to have written thus for publication would have suited his style and temperament. "I should have been more careful and more assured if I had been addressing a definite friend than I am when I am looking at the divers visages of a whole multitude. . . . I have naturally a comic and familiar style. . . . I have no skill in ceremonious letters." (I, 40.) But the friend he would have been stimulated to write to was dead, and he could not bring himself to address an imaginary correspondent. "For as to dealing with the wind as others do, I should not know how, except in a dream, being a sworn enemy to all falsification."

Ensconced, then, in his library, with no very definite aim in view, he occupied himself at first in reading and in annotating his books, as had always been his habit. His literary tastes were almost entirely classical; at school he had never been allowed to read any of the sentimental romances of the day. "Of Lancelot of the Lake, of Amadis, of Huon of Bordeaux, and such idle trash of books wherewith childhood amuses itself, I was not so much as ac-

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[2] "If all the paper which in former days I have scribbled for ladies, when my hand was truly carried away by my passion, were in existence, there might haply be found some page worthy to be communicated unto our idle youth infatuated with this fury." (I, 40.)

quainted with their names, and to this day know not what they contain." (I, 26.) Printed editions of the classics were becoming common (it is difficult to realize how recent was the discovery of printing), and Montaigne's library probably contained most that were then obtainable. The Latin authors he read in the original Latin, but for the Greek he relied on translations. Amyot's French translation of his favourite Plutarch was never far from his hand. Seneca came next in his estimation. "The books I chiefly use," he says, "are Plutarch, since he has become French, and Seneca." He loved poetry; his essays are crowded with quotations from Virgil, Lucretius, Catullus, and Horace, and his criticism of poetry, as of literature in general, was as sound as his criticism of life. He tells us often that he was an impatient reader, that he could not be bothered with difficult passages, so that when he came to them he skipped them or took up another book.[3] But he knew his favourite authors thor-

[3] "In books I seek only to give myself pleasure by an honest amusement; or if I study, I only seek there that learning which treats of the knowledge of myself and which instructs me how to die well, and to live well. If in reading I meet with any difficulties, I do not bite my nails over them; I leave them as I found them after I have attacked them once or twice. . . . I have an impulsive wit. . . . If one book seems tedious unto me I take up another." (II, 10.)

oughly and books belonging to him have been found carefully annotated throughout with his comments.

During the writing of the *Essays* he turned to books for ideas and stimulus as another might turn to the world outside. He borrowed largely; he could never resist plucking something or other from Plutarch.[4] Over and over again he says that his book is made up of "spoils"; no one is franker in acknowledging his debt to other writers than he is.

Out of this desultory reading came the *Essays*. The first book, or at any rate the early part of it, is mainly interesting because in it one can see how Montaigne for some time fumbled in the dark. He began by jotting down anything he had in his mind at the moment — an anecdote or a maxim from the ancients, a recent observation or experience, a thought about Fear or Sadness or that bugbear Death he was always teaching himself to face, and then commenting upon it to see how far that comment would go. In this way he assayed or tested his judgment and his opinions, and in this way the idea came to him of making his book a portrait of himself. There is very little personal revelation in the

[4] "But it is more difficult for me to be without Plutarch. . . . I can no sooner glance at him but I pull some leg or wing from him." (III, 5.)

early essays, and what there is was largely put in after the first edition, when the portrait idea was ripening in his mind. He discovered himself in writing — "I have no more made my book than my book hath made me," he says (II, 18) — and disintegrated all that experience from which his singularly tolerant and self-reliant philosophy of life had come. He laid bare trifles and weaknesses. He was concerned to understand himself, to get at the truth about himself. He wrote, he declared, not to establish the truth but to find it out. "I had rather understand myself well in myself than in Cicero." (III, 13.) "Our life consisteth partly in folly, partly in wisdom. He that writes of it but reverently and regularly omits the better moiety of it." (III, 5.) "Diversity is the most universal quality." (II, 37.) "Man all in all is but a botched and parti-coloured work." (II, 20.) "Our essence is cemented with disordered qualities." (III, 1.) One needs to know the *Essays* thoroughly, to have felt at home, or perhaps it would be truer to say to have felt at sea, in that immense diffusion of odd facts and casual observations of human nature, before reflections such as these are actually borne into one's mind as they were into Montaigne's, flung there by the surge and heave of so much diversity. Montaigne was in a very real sense the author of his book; his flitting, observing, jotting, and considering spirit was alive in each sentence of it. It was, as

he said, " consubstantial " with him: a member of his life.

His way of writing was like his way of observing and thinking, discontinuous, easily distracted, broken into constantly by the (to him) ever-increasing diversities of life. He was a born " straggler." " There is nothing so contrary to my style as a continued narration," he declared. " I take the first theme from Fortune; they are all equally good to me, and I never design to develop them thoroughly. For I do not see the whole of anything. . . . Of a hundred members and visages that everything has, I take one, sometimes to taste it merely, sometimes to skim it, and sometimes to squeeze it to the bone." (I, 50.) He could not bear what he called " a vehement and laborious premeditation," which made " compositions smell of the oil and the lamp." " Preparation gives more to hope than it brings with it. A man doth often strip himself unto his doublet to leap shorter than he did in his gown." " This also happeneth unto me," he added, " that where I seek myself I find not myself; and I find myself more by chance than by the search of mine own judgment." (I, 10.) He fancied too that his straggling was poetical and imparted a fantastic grace to his writings, his fantasies following one another and looking at one another but with an oblique look. " I love a poetic style by leaps and frisks." He also fancied that the leaps and frisks

were useful for keeping the reader's attention, an opinion in which not many readers, I think, will share. Just because of his "straggling," Montaigne is not easy to read. The drift of his argument is often difficult to follow, and the "intricate confusion" by which he designed to capture the reader's attention sometimes has the very opposite effect.

These rather touching, because so amateurish, admissions of artistic ambitions remind us that there was a dash of the artist in Montaigne. He loved poetry: "History is my chief pursuit," he says, "or poesy, which I particularly love." In youth he had written verses, but evidently they were bad ones, and he could not "abide himself therein" and says: "A man may play the fool everywhere else but not in poesy." (II, 17.) That side of him which hankered after "a kind of poetic march" in his writings, and loved to pick out "some unwonted lustre" in his subject, deplored his own inelegancies of expression and physical clumsiness. "Everything about me is clumsy and lacks both grace and beauty. . . . My handling adds nothing to the matter. . . . The best tale in the world becomes dry and tarnished in my hands. I cannot speak but in good earnest, and am altogether barren of the facility which I see in many of my companions for entertaining the first comers and for holding a whole party in talk, or for amusing a prince with all man-

ner of discourse, without growing weary, never wanting matter, by reason of their skill in knowing how to treat the first subject that comes to hand."

"Of address and disposition, I never had any, yet am I the son of a father well-disposed and of a liveliness that continued with him even to his old age. He seldom found any man of his condition who could match him in all exercises of the body; as I have seldom found any who have not outgone me, except it were in running, wherein I was mediocre. As for music, were it either with my voice, which is very unapt, or in instruments, I could never be taught any part of it. In dancing, tennis, or wrestling, I have not been able to attain more than a very slight and common sufficiency, and none at all in swimming, fencing, vaulting, or leaping. My hands are so awkward that I can hardly write for myself, and I read but little better. . . . I cannot fold a letter properly, nor did I ever know how to cut a pen, nor carve well at table, nor harness a horse, nor carry a hawk on my fist, nor cast him off. . . . The conditions of my body are, in fine, very well agreeing with those of my mind: there is nothing lively about them but only a full and constant vigour." (II, 17.)

We may however, I think, be glad that he recognized his own free and rugged "disposition" and the mistake it would have been to affect graces of man-

ner and style so contrary to his grain. He had not enough sense of unity to be a great artist. It is best that his artistic impulses should show as they do in scattered impressions throughout his book, and that his natural love of simplicity and contentment with rough and ready, though always imaginative, speech should in the main have prevailed. His unaffected, significant language (the nearest equivalent to which we get in his contemporary Florio's Elizabethan English, bad though Florio's translation often is) is best suited to his sturdy, vigorous, independent mind. The style of Walter Pater's chapters on Montaigne in *Gaston de Latour,* full of insight as they are into the essayist's philosophy, is too exotic for its subject-matter and suggests a court florist wiring a bunch of strong meadow flowers. Montaigne's love of freedom and independence were his most marked features. " I have a mind free and altogether her own, accustomed to follow her own humour." Ceremonies, artificialities, deceptions, lying, all were to him so many shackles upon a man's freedom. " It is for servants to lie and for freemen to speak the truth." " To lie is a villainous vice," (II, 18) he bursts out, and again: " Verily lying is an accursèd vice. Nothing makes us men, and no other means keeps us bound to one another, but our word." (I, 9.) He scorned an empty eloquence, such as in slavish imitation of Ciceronian oratory was then fashionable — " Fie on that elo-

quence which leaves us with a desire for it and not for things" (I, 40) — and the use of grand words where simpler would do. When he heard architects mouth out "those big words, pilasters, architraves, cornices, Corinthian and Doric work, and other such of their jargon," he thought that they must be talking of palaces until he discovered that they meant nothing but "the paltry pieces of my kitchen door." (I, 51.) He strove for simplicity and sincerity of thought. People excuse themselves that their heads are full of ideas, but that they cannot express them because they are not eloquent; that, Montaigne said, is a "mere foppery." "I am of opinion, and Socrates would have it so, that he who has in his mind a clear and lively imagination will utter it, whether in Bergamask, or by signs if he be dumb." "'*Ipsæ res verba rapiunt*' (Things themselves carry words with them)." "I would have the subject-matter prevail and so fill the imagination of him that hearkeneth that he have no remembrance of the words. The speech that I love is a simple and unaffected speech, the same on paper as in the mouth, a speech that is succulent and sinewy, brief and terse, not so delicate and smooth as vehement and brisk, rather difficult than tedious, void of affectation, free, loose, and bold: let every member of it make its own body; not pedantic, not friar-like, nor lawyer-like, but rather soldierlike. . . . Let me use none other than is spoken in the

markets of Paris." (I, 26.) He strove, too, to get rid of all thoughts and ideas that are merely lumber. To discover our real needs, those that spring out of the very marrow of our constitution, we should look into ourselves, withdraw into ourselves; that is the teaching of his fine essay " On Solitude." Such tastes and tendencies show how admirably he had assimilated the humanist ideal to rational and disciplined living.

It was not easy for Montaigne to lead the retired life he had designed for himself. He loved good company and longed for a friend. No pleasure was fully delightful unless shared. If wisdom were to be offered to him at the price of keeping it concealed, he declared that he would refuse it. " My essential disposition is fitted for communication. . . . I am born for society and for friendship. The solitude I love is . . . in order to restrain and confine, not my steps, but my desires and cares, resigning foreign solicitude and mortally shunning servitude and obligation and not so much the throng of men as the throng of affairs. Local solitude, to tell the truth, doth rather extend me and enlarge me outwardly. I throw myself into affairs of State and into the universe more willingly when I am alone. At the Louvre and among a crowd of people I shut myself up and shrink into my own skin. The crowd thrusts me back upon myself, and I never entertain myself so madly and so licentiously as in

places of respect and ceremonious discretion. Our follies make me not laugh, but our wisdoms do." (III, 3.)

He could write only when in the mood for writing. The moods were often few and far between. Restless and fidgety, he was impatient for inspiration; if none came quickly, he put down his pen. Walking up and down his room, turning over his books, riding (his favourite exercise) [5] about his estate and the country-side, or in conversation, ideas would come, his imagination would be kindled, he would hurry to his Tower to write. He says repeatedly that he had a bad memory and that he was apt to forget the idea he was carrying even while he crossed the court of the château to go to the Tower. His imagination, once fired, was vivid. "Methinks," he writes, "our spirits have more need of lead than wings." He was no indefatigable student, but easily tired of reading, easily distracted and irritated, even by the buzzing of a fly. He could not concentrate on books for long. "This occupation of books is as painful as any other . . . and as great an enemy unto health." Moreover his independent, vigorous spirit kicked at reliance on others' wisdom. "Rouse yourself," he would break away from

[5] "If I be once on horseback I alight very unwillingly, for it is the seat I like best whether I be sound or sick." (I, 48.) "I should choose to wear out my life with my seat in the saddle, ever riding." (III, 9.)

his books to exclaim, " you will find within you natural arguments against death, true ones and the best fitted to serve you at need. Should I have died less merrily before I read the Tusculanes? " (III, 12.)

The *Essays* consist of three books. The first two books were published in 1580; nine years had gone to the writing of them, but they were years by no means exclusively spent in retirement. The inscription in the library represented at most a gesture of withdrawal, a gesture that reflected only the meditative side of Montaigne. Dr. Armaingaud in his chapter " *La Politique de Montaigne,*" in the first volume of his new edition of the *Essays,* has established Montaigne's constant political activity during those years in support of the party of moderation and of his friend and future sovereign Henry of Navarre. At the château he lived the life of an ordinary country gentleman (there are various anecdotes about his neighbours in the *Essays*), and though he had no liking for the management of estates and household affairs and declared that he did not know a cabbage from a lettuce, his respect for his father's memory and his own restless nature kept him continually fidgeting about such matters, except at such times when he put distance between himself and domestic worries and, as he would have described it, " diverted " himself by travelling. He was a great believer in diversion and distraction as

means of escape from ills. For years he suffered acutely from the stone and, being exceedingly contemptuous of doctors, which was not perhaps surprising in those days of superstitious medicine, often travelled to the medicinal baths in Germany, Italy, and France. "I have seen, by occasion of my travels, almost all the famous baths of Christendom, and some years since have begun to use them: for in general I think bathing to be healthy and believe that we incur no slight incommodities in our health by having lost this habit." (The context shows that he refers also to the custom of washing.) "... And as to the drinking of them ... although I have not perceived any extraordinary and miraculous effects in them ... yet I have seen few or none whom these waters have made worse; and one cannot without malice deny this, that they stir up the appetite, make digestion easy, and bestow on us a kind of fresh gaiety. ... For this reason I have hitherto chosen to reside at and make use of those where I found the most amenity of situation, most convenience of lodging, of victuals, and of company, as are in France the baths of Banières, those of Plombières on the frontiers of Germany and Lorraine, those of Baden in Switzerland, of Lucca in Tuscany, and especially those of Della Villa, which I have used most often and at divers seasons of the year." (II, 37.)

The third book was not added until the fourth

edition of the *Essays* appeared in 1588. It is the most interesting of the three books, not only on account of the details which it gives of Montaigne's personal habits, but because as to both subject-matter and expression it is the most spontaneous. The essayist's fame had spread during the eight years' interval; moreover his seclusion, such as it had been, from political affairs was now a thing of the past. After eighteen months spent in travelling through Germany to Italy he was recalled to be made Mayor of Bordeaux and was elected for a second year of office, a proof in itself of his efficiency in that position. There is no doubt of his valuable political services to both courts during this period (Dr. Armaingaud's chapter should again be referred to). Henry of Navarre was a visitor at the château on two occasions, and Montaigne's counsels helped to shape his policy. Naturally, therefore, the third book was written with much more assurance and none of the uncertainty as to aim which had marked the first essays. The impulse to write had taken such hold that he was at times dismayed at the task he had undertaken. "Who seeth not that I have entered upon a road wherein I shall travel without pause and without toil so long as there shall be ink or paper in the world? . . . And when shall I come to an end of representing a continual agitation and alteration of my thoughts, what matter soever they may happen upon, since Diomedes filled six thou-

sand books with the sole subject of grammar? What is babbling like to produce since faltering and looseness of tongue stuffed the world with so horrible a weight of volumes? So many words about words alone! O Pythagoras, why didst thou not conjure this tempest? " (III, 9.)

The portrait idea had become almost an obsession with him. He communicates innumerable trifling details of his personal habits and tastes, careless as to whether the catalogue should be boring, and more than one reader has exclaimed at his egotism as Dupuy did: " What the devil do we care whether he sometimes liked white wine and sometimes red? "

Egotism it is, of course, yet rarely has an egotist studied himself so impersonally and with such inexhaustible curiosity. He could not get either to the end or to the bottom of the inexplicable medley of his ingredients; that jumbled parcel, his self, fascinated him, because the more he came to examine it, it was such a jumble and such an epitome of the universe. Besides, as he became increasingly absorbed in his favourite theme of " diversity," it was an inevitable reaction that he should dwell upon that mysterious ego or pith of individuality which kept his self intact, though why that should be so, seeing its hotchpotch of contents, Heaven only knew! Conscious of such diversity without and within, the " I " that emerges and

controls may be excused for regarding itself as something of importance. To Montaigne life was the bearing in mind of that amazing likeness in miniature between the self and the outside world. His seemingly absurd indiscrimination as to the personal details about himself which were worth telling was but deep calling unto deep, or trifle unto trifle, his characteristic way of declaring that, ageing as he was and suffering from disease, he still most tenaciously lived and could still discover in himself the intricate and baffling pattern of life's eternally changing beckonings and behests. He enjoyed life and noted anxiously, though resignedly, the way old age gained on him — his less keen eyesight, the prudence with which he found himself avoiding natural jollities. It was this anxiety which was at the root of the much censored essay "Upon some verses of Virgil" (III, 5), wherein he says that because no longer in need of the prudence and moderation which he sought as a younger man in order to defend himself from too much love of living, he must recall the memories of those younger days in order to regain some of the savour of life. Many, it is said, are the copies of the *Essays* from which the pages containing this famous and in its essence most wise essay have been torn by puritanical readers unable, presumably, to bear the allusions to pleasures which they themselves have painfully foregone. Montaigne is often coarse. He refers to

close-stools and genital organs, and gives unpleasant details of his sufferings from stone in the bladder, so that his frankness may outstep even the requirements of modern conversation. But his coarseness was more deliberate than instinctive. In his zest for spontaneity of speech and thought he let himself be carried, as so many humanists were carried, into the unæsthetic prejudice that all that can be done ought to be talked about. Actually he was modest and grave in demeanour, and dressed, as his father had dressed, either in black or white. He was a small man, his face " not fat but full," his " complexion between jovial and melancholy." In the portraits of him that exist there is no sign of the jovial. They show a grave, meditative gentleman, with wide discerning eyes and a melancholy expression, sensitive and fastidious. " Man all in all is but a botched and parti-coloured work," he might be saying, yet not bitterly. Those comprehending eyes show reserve and hesitation, and inscrutability too, beyond a point, like the world he surveys. " I teach not . . . I relate," is their message, " for when all is said . . . *que sçais-je?* "

## CHAPTER IV

### *Montaigne's Moderation*

SO much has been said about Montaigne's moderation that his readers may be surprised to find the essay " Of Moderation " (I, 30) a short one and not remarkable except for a few pithy sentences such as " A man may love virtue too much and behave to excess in a righteous action "; " The archer that overshoots the mark faileth no otherwise than he who doth not reach it." It is indeed a typical example of his habit of " straggling " and ending abruptly without any return to the general idea from which he started. Montaigne was not a methodical thinker: he was much more interested in the exception than in the rule. He rarely generalizes except as to Diversity, " that most universal quality," and his moderation was too much a part of him for it to be expressed in any systematic form. Bayle St. John goes some way towards explaining Montaigne's tolerance when he says: " He is usually rebuked for his egotism and scepticism, but it was to a certain extent because he was an egotist and a sceptic that the truth became apparent to him."

Ardent believers, fanatical thinkers, are not as a rule instinctively tolerant people; it does not naturally occur to them that there is something to be said on the other side. Toleration and religious belief are now compatible, but that is either because belief is less positive than it used to be, or because believers have been forced by the experience of their ancestors to accept the practical rulings of tolerance. The early Christian saints and martyrs knew nothing of tolerance. They saw no alternative but martyrdom for the faith they held with such absolute conviction, and they were as ready to kill those whom they could not convince as they were to sacrifice themselves. A feature of the bliss that was reserved for the blessed was the contemplation of the state (which included the physical torments) of the damned. This ferocity of temperament was foreign to Montaigne; even in his scepticism there was nothing aggressive or militant. For this reason writers have disputed hotly whether he was a sceptic, since he evidently had no desire to overthrow Catholicism, and died, as he said he wished to die, fortified by the last rites of the Church.

The truth is, I think, that he was sceptical in much the same way as the modern world is sceptical; he seems to have skipped the stage of combative scepticism, the stage in which many people have felt themselves bound to proclaim violently their unbelief. He was saved from it partly perhaps

by his egotism, if you like to call by that name his love of personal freedom which made him unwilling to go to extremes — "I will follow the best side to the fire, but not into it if I can choose" — partly by another characteristic, also, it may be, reducible to egotism, indifference to high or ultimate truths. For Montaigne's omnivorous curiosity did not go beyond a certain point; in metaphysical questions or in scientific problems he was not deeply interested. It was the subjective and not the objective side of life which fascinated him. He was vaguely aware of the objective side, as where he says: "Things by themselves have peradventure their weight and measures and conditions," but he was too much absorbed in the business of discovering how subjective were so many hitherto accepted objectivities to be drawn towards any really scientific study of life. The diversities of human nature, the inconstancy and psychological basis of opinion and imagination, the fallibility of the senses, even of what is called reason, disposed him to no conclusion but that of suspended judgment, "*Que sçais-je?*" concerning ultimate truth. The motto and the symbol of the balances, which he had cut on his seal, satisfied his picturesque imagination, though no doubt he would have admitted here, as he said elsewhere, that "every metaphor limpeth and no simile is exact." They sufficiently represented the sum of his own experience, and a

point of view beyond which, in those times made so terrible by fanaticism, it seemed to him madness to go. He might easily have pursued his scepticism further. The " Apology of Raymond Sebond," that tremendous diatribe against the frailty of man and his vanity in presuming to knowledge of God and universal truth, cannot have been unhesitatingly advanced as an argument for blind acceptance of faith by one who had admitted in that same essay that " We are Christians by the same title as we are Perigordins or Germans." That he held opinions which constitute pronounced religious scepticism is undeniable. For proof of that, we have his views on death, immortality, and repentance, which were completely pagan, and his essays on education, which make no reference to religious teaching, to say nothing of this famous " Apology," in size more than one-sixth of the whole three books of essays, which seeks to destroy every assumption that human reason can attain to knowledge of God or indeed to any knowledge at all. " Methinks I have sufficiently declared how little understanding she [reason] hath of herself. And he who hath no understanding of himself, what can he have understanding of? ' *Quasi vero mensuram ullius rei possit agere qui sui nesciat* ' (as though he could take measure of anything that knoweth not his own measure)." (II, 12.)

It may be, as Dr. Armaingaud in his chapter on

" The Religion of Montaigne " suggests, that Montaigne's misuse of his own arguments in the " Apology," and his everyday attitude of professing Christianity were deliberate feints for reasons of politics, and that he thought that he was more likely to influence religious people with his ideas of tolerance if he wrote as one of them, and not as a declared sceptic attacking their tolerance from outside. But it seems to me just as likely that Montaigne, despite his scepticism, had a weakness for the religious point of view, and such an accepter and appreciator of conflicting thoughts and feelings as he was would have been in no haste to end the conflict; he would have found the entertainment of irreconcilable thoughts and contrary beliefs in keeping with his relish for the diversity of life. But though I think that the word " feint," in connexion with Montaigne's professions of belief, such as they were, is rather too emphatic a word, suggesting that his scepticism had a more complete hold on him than it probably had, I agree entirely with Dr. Armaingaud in stressing the motives, or rather the policy, behind all that Montaigne wrote on faith and doubt. The key to Montaigne's attitude is the realization, not of what was at the bottom of his scepticism, but of what was uppermost in his mind. A profoundly philosophical person cannot easily understand Montaigne; he expects to find intellectual consistency and is disappointed; but the

ordinary person, who is not so baffled by inconsistencies, readily can. What was uppermost in Montaigne's mind was his horror of cruelty. His instinctive human feelings were much stronger than his intellectual beliefs. " It is an over-valuing of one's conjectures to cause a man to be burned alive for them." In that sentence, in that felt contrast between the vague conjectural quality of opinion and the undeniable flesh-and-blood reality of life, lies the essence of Montaigne. That essence of humanity, sanity, respect for life in all its forms, was rare in the France of Montaigne's day. Margaret of Angoulême, Queen of Navarre, the Egeria of Nérac, she who declared on her death-bed: " What I have done I did from compassion, not conviction," had possessed it, but her gentle influence had been powerless to check the fierce tide of superstitious fear that lay behind the torture of heretics and witches. Mediævalism died hard. There were few, as few among the Reformers as among the Catholics, in whom, like Margaret and Montaigne, the Renaissance spirit came fully to birth and who, as its true personifications, abhorred dogmatism and were more anxious to learn than to proselytize.

Montaigne shuddered at cruelty. " I could never so much as endure without grief to see pursued and killed a poor innocent beast that is without defence, and of whom we receive no offence at all. And as it commonly happeneth that the stag

when he feels himself out of breath and finds his strength fail, having no other remedy left him, he turns back and yields himself unto us that pursue him, suing for mercy by his tears:

> . . . *questuque cruentus*
> *Atque imploranti similis*, VERG. *Æn.* vii 501.

this has always seemed to me a very grievous spectacle. I seldom take any beast alive but I restore him his liberty." (II, 11.) The fanatical excesses, rife in the religious wars, horrified him. " Savages do not offend me so much with roasting and eating the bodies of the dead, as those which torment and persecute the living." Of the cruelties perpetrated before executions, he writes: " As for me, even in matters of justice, whatsoever is beyond a simple death, I deem it to be pure cruelty, and especially amongst us who ought to have a care to send men's souls on their way in a good state, which cannot be, having first agitated and brought them to despair by intolerable torture. . . . I live in an age wherein we abound with incredible examples of this vice, through the licentiousness of our civil wars: and we find nothing in ancient histories more extreme than what we see practised. But that hath in no way made me accustomed to it. I could hardly persuade myself before I had seen it that there could be found souls so savage that for the mere pleasure of murder would commit it, would mangle and

hack limbs and sharpen their wits to invent unheard-of tortures and new forms of death, and that without enmity, without profit, and only to this end, that they may enjoy the pleasing spectacle of the pitiable gestures and movements, the groans and lamentable cries of a man dying in agony." (II, 11.)

" God be thanked, my belief is not affected by blows. . . . To kill men bright and clear light is needed; and our life is too real and essential to warrant these supernatural and fantastic accidents. As for drugs and poisons I leave them out of account: they are homicides and of the worst kind. . . . Let us, who are perpetually tossed to and fro by our own domestic illusions, not seek for strange and unknown ones." (III, 11.) " Torture and racking are dangerous inventions and seem rather to be trials of endurance than of truth." (II, 5.) He was a great scorner of superstition, realizing that the roots of cruelty lay therein. " Nothing is so firmly believed," he declared, " as that which a man knoweth least; nor are any people so confident as those that tell us fables, such as alchemists, prognosticators, astrologers, palmists, physicians, and all folk of that kind." (I, 31.) He protested against the torture of witches. " Some years ago I travelled through the country of a sovereign prince, who to do me a favour and to abate my incredulity did me the grace to let me see in his presence and in private

ten or twelve prisoners of this sort, and amongst them an old woman, in truth a very sorceress for ugliness and deformity, one who had long been very famous in that profession. I was shown both evidence and voluntary confessions and I know not what scarce visible mark upon this miserable old woman; and I questioned and talked as much as I liked, bringing the most careful attention that I could to the matter. . . . In the end and in all conscience I should rather have appointed them hellebore than hemlock. . . . When all is done, it is an over-valuing of one's conjectures to cause a man to be burned alive for them." (III, 11.)

To repeat, Montaigne's humanity was dominant, and there was nothing fierce or desolating in his scepticism, which was aimed only at the savage intolerance of his times. He had no desire to equip doubt with a bigoted violence and thereby introduce another furious combatant to the already convulsed scene. He proffered doubt, or rather a wise ignorance and suspended judgment, as a moderating influence between these bitter antagonisms which were wrecking his country. " Oh, monstrous war! " he writes. " . . . She is of so ruinous and malign a nature that, together with all things else, she ruineth herself. . . . All discipline flies from her. She cometh to cure sedition, and is herself full of it; she would chastise disobedience, and showeth example of it; and, being employed for the defence of the

laws, playeth the part of a rebel against her own ordinances. What then have we come to? Our physic bringeth infection." " Is there any malady in a government that it is worth while combating with so mortal a drug? " " Plato is not willing that a man should offer violence to the repose of his country in order to cure it, and alloweth not that reformation which troubleth and hazardeth the whole estate and which is purchased with the blood and ruin of the citizens." (III, 12.) How dared one side or the other, he thought, invoke God to its support? " There is no hostility so excellent as Christian hostility. Our zeal worketh wonders, whenever it secondeth our inclinations towards hatred, cruelty, ambition, avarice, detraction, or rebellion. On the other hand, towards goodness, benignity, or temperance, it neither runs nor flies. . . . If we believed in God . . . at least he would stand in the same rank in our affections as do riches, pleasures, glory, and our friends; the best of us doth not fear to wrong him so much as he fears to wrong his neighbour, his kinsman, or his master." (II, 12.)

And, as in religious disputes and warfare, so in all else the inexhaustible source of his moderation was his respect for life. It was not an admiring respect. Montaigne had no exalted idea of human nature; it was capable, he thought, of greatness, but on occasions only and " by fits." Heroes and worthies of former ages had done wonderful things,

" exceeding our natural powers," and, he admitted, it happened sometimes to ordinary men " like ourselves " " to rouse our soul far beyond its ordinary pitch, when it is stirred by the discourses or example of another." But that was a kind of passion that urged and in a way ravished us from out of ourselves, and, that storm over, we reverted to our everyday state of being, moved by trifles and distempered, " just as one of the vulgar sort." For that reason, to judge of a man, his common actions must be looked at, and he must be " surprised in his workaday clothes." (II, 29.) Virtue, which was not the same thing as, and much more noble than, the goodness which came natural to some people born mild and good, virtue which implied resistance to, and mastery over, evil passions, was rare. Looking within himself he knew that, though he had been fortunately born with a hatred of vices — " Fortune hath made me to be born of a race famous for integrity and honesty and of a very good father " — if he had been born with " a less regular complexion " his state would have been " very pitiful." " I have not greatly striven to bridle the desires wherewith I have found myself beset." He had been able sometimes to avoid passions — " All things at their birth are weak and tender, we must therefore keep our eyes open at the beginning; for, as when a thing is small, we discover not the danger, so when it is grown, we can no longer discover the remedy." But

how much more easy was it not to enter than to get forth! " Passions are to me as easy to avoid as they are difficult for me to moderate." The Stoic doctrine, which prescribed an absolute impassivity, an annihilation of the passions by the will, was too difficult; besides, its extreme dictates were contrary to common sense. " All doth not consist in imagination. . . . Shall we make our skins believe the stripes of a stirrup-leather do but tickle it? and our palate that aloes are wine of Graves? Shall we violate the general law of nature, which is seen in every living creature under heaven, of trembling and pain? The very trees seem to groan at injuries." Certainly it was in our power, " if not to annul, at least to diminish pain by patience, and though the body be troubled by it, yet to keep the mind and reason in good temper." It was thus that virtue, valour, and resolution had come to be esteemed. The Epicureans were wiser than the Stoics because they were more human. They were alive to pleasure and to pain, and realized that neither delight in the one nor dread of the other could be annihilated. To be virtuous it was not necessary to shun pleasures or to behave as if pain did not exist. Happiness of soul was more valuable than physical happiness, but the sovereign good lay not only in the grim Stoic virtue, but in all the pleasures which come from satisfying natural needs, physical as well as intellectual. All vices were not equal, as the Stoics insisted, some were

less harmful than others, and the prudent man had to distinguish from among his inclinations, desires, and passions those in whose train came unhappiness greater than the happiness got from indulging in them. In short, the Stoics ignored human nature; the Epicureans recognized and took account of it. Montaigne's wide, tolerant outlook was at bottom theirs. It was an enlightened, undogmatic Epicureanism, but it was Epicureanism for all that; and here we come up against something in Montaigne which for all the width and modernity of his outlook makes him in another way unmodern and unattractive to modern thought. He was a moralist; that is to say, he took for granted, as instinctively as the modern world does not take it for granted, that human conduct is a serious matter, that human beings are serious people seriously concerned to discover what is worth having in life and what is not.

Seriousness of this kind is not a feature of today. It is perhaps incompatible with, if not mocked by, our advanced knowledge of the queer springs of human actions, and of the extent to which our minds are controlled by psychological processes of which we are quite unconscious. It presupposes a stability of outlook and an un-self-consciousness which we have learned to distrust. It was after all Montaigne's realization of the flux within that led him, a moralist by upbringing and temperament, to see that, beyond respect for the ancient virtues of

truth and honesty, ready-made rules of conduct could not be prescribed, and to abandon practically all that we associate with moral teaching except the bare moralist attitude itself. That attitude of absorption in the problem of self-government remained with him always, lingering, despite his emancipation from any declared code, just as a military habit of standing to attention sticks to the old soldier long after his soldiering days. "It were folly to trust to yourself if you cannot govern yourself." (I, 39.) Therein lay his conception of the freedom which he demands for the "well-born" soul. "Man must take heed not only what he speaks and what he thinks, but why he thinks." (III, 8.) Reason alone could determine what was desirable and undesirable. True morality was that way to which reason, acting upon our experience of life, and our knowledge of ourselves, pointed. He believed that the origin of all moral codes, though the codes had since become stereotyped and insensitive to realities, lay in reason, and that mankind's notions of good and evil were not, as Socrates thought, deposited in our minds by a God who created us, but were reasonably derived from men's contact with life and with themselves. This explained why the customs and moralities of different peoples and races were so different. "The laws of conscience, which we say are born of nature, are born of custom: every man holding in inward

veneration the opinions and manners approved and received around him, cannot leave them without remorse, nor apply himself unto them without applause. When the men of Crete would in former ages curse any man, they besought the gods to engage him in some bad custom. But the principal effect of her power is to seize and entangle us in such wise that it shall hardly lie in us to free ourselves from her holdfast and come to our wits again, in order to discourse and reason about her ordinances. Verily, because we suck them in with the milk of our birth, and because the world's visage presents itself in that guise unto our first view, it seemeth we are born with a condition to follow that course. And the common imaginations that we find in credit about us, and infused into our minds by the seed of our fathers, seem to be the general and natural ones. Whereupon it followeth that whatsoever is off the hinges of custom we believe to be off the hinges of reason, God knows how unreasonably for the most part." " He that would free himself from this violent prejudice of custom shall find divers things received with an unquestioning resolution that have no other anchor but the hoary beard and wrinkles of the usage that accompanies them; but this mask once torn off, and if these things be referred to truth and reason, he shall feel his judgment to be quite overturned, and thereby re-established in a much surer state." (I, 23.)

As I have pointed out in the first chapter, the conscience of Montaigne was the voice of a free and reasonable soul which knows itself and can therefore be trusted " as a touchstone " to " touch our deeds and try our actions." " None but yourself knows rightly whether you be demiss and cruel, or loyal and devout. Others see you not, but guess you by uncertain conjectures. They see not so much your nature as your art. Adhere not then to their opinion, but hold unto your own." " Others guide us, as one who, seated at his table, paints seas, reefs, and havens and makes the image of a ship sail about there in all safety; but put him to it in earnest, he knows not how to handle the matter. They make such a description of our infirmities as doth a town crier who crieth a lost horse, or dog; such is its hair, such its height, such its ears; but present it to him, for all that he doth not know it." (III, 13.)

As for himself, he declared, he loved as much to be happy as to be wise. Wiser sort of men than he might frame for themselves an altogether spiritual life, but he, being of the " common sort," could not live otherwise than he lived. Besides, " the body hath a great part in our being. . . . Those who would sunder our two principal parts and disunite the one from the other are to blame. We ought to recouple and rejoin them. We must bid the soul not to withdraw and entertain herself apart, not to despise and abandon the body (which she cannot well do ex-

cept by some counterfeit apish trick), but to combine with it, to embrace, cherish, assist, and control it, to counsel and correct it and bring it back when it goes astray; in short, espouse and act towards it as a husband." (II, 17.) In his last essay he denounced "that inhuman wisdom which would make us disdainful and hostile towards the care of the body." "I deem it an equal error either to take natural pleasures against the heart or to take them too near the heart. Xerxes was a ninnyhammer, who, given to all human voluptuousness, offered a reward to him that should discover new pleasures for him. But not much less of a simpleton is he that abridges those which Nature hath devised for him. One should neither seek nor avoid them, but one should receive them. . . . We have no need to exaggerate their inanity, it is sufficiently felt and sufficiently manifested, thanks to our sickly, joy-diminishing spirit, which makes us distaste both them and itself. . . . Myself who boast of embracing so heedfully and so particularly the commodities of life, yet whensoever I look closely into them, find almost nothing therein but wind. But what of that? We are nothing but wind. And the wind moreover, more wisely than we, loveth to bluster and to be in agitation, and is content with its own functions, without desiring stability or solidity, qualities that be not its own." (III, 13.) "Why do we not likewise value a man by that which is his own?" (I,

42.) "We have the pleasures suitable to our fortune; let us not usurp those of greatness. Our own are more natural." (III, 10.) "I, that am of a mingled and homely condition, . . . am such that I do not abandon myself grossly to the present pleasures whose power is human and universal, intellectually sensible and sensibly intellectual. . . . There are some (as Aristotle saith) who with a savage stupidity find bodily pleasures distasteful. Why renounce they not also breathing? Why live they not on what is theirs alone and refuse the light? . . . Will they not seek the quadrature of the circle, even when they lie with their wives? . . . Nature hath, like a kind mother, seen to this, that such actions as she for our necessities hath enjoined unto us should also be pleasurable unto us, and doth invite us to them not only by reason, but also by appetite. It is not right to break her rules. When I behold both Cæsar and Alexander at the thickest of their great labours enjoy so fully human and corporal pleasures I say not that they thereby relaxed their minds; I say that they strengthened them, by vigour of spirit submitting their violent occupations and laborious thoughts to the usage of ordinary life. Wise had they been had they believed that here was their ordinary vocation and these their extraordinary. What egregious fools we are! 'He hath passed his life in idleness,' we say; 'I have done nothing this day.' What, have you not lived?

It is not only the fundamental, but the noblest of your occupations. Have you been able to meditate upon your life and manage it? Then you have accomplished the greatest work of all. . . . Have you known how to compose your manners? You have done more than he who hath composed books. Have you known how to take rest? You have done more than he who hath taken empires and cities. The great and glorious masterpiece of man is to live to the purpose. All other things, to reign, to lay up treasure, to build, are at the most part but appendices and aids thereto. . . . There is nothing so goodly and so lawful as to play the man well and duly; nor any science so difficult as to know how to live this life well; and of our infirmities the most savage is to despise our being. . . . It is an absolute perfection and, as it were, divine for a man to know how to enjoy his existence loyally. We seek for other conditions because we understand not the use of our own and we go outside of ourselves because we know not what is happening there. Thus it is in vain that we mount upon stilts, for, be we upon them, yet must we go with our own legs; and sit we upon the highest throne of the world, yet we do but sit upon our own behind." (III, 13.)

"Supercelestial opinions" and "subterrestrial manners," he remarked, ironically, often went together. At the would-be wise he was ever ready to jest. "It is not men's follies but their wisdoms that

make me laugh," he wrote. " I have in my day seen a hundred artificers and as many labourers more wise and more happy than some rectors, and whom I would rather resemble." " Whence proceeds the subtlest folly but from the subtlest wisdom? " (II, 12.) " Is there anything so assured, resolute, disdainful, contemplative, so grave, so serious, as the ass? " (III, 8.)

We see that Montaigne's actual morality, the freedom which he allowed himself, is very like the freedom which the modern world unquestioningly takes; but his serious concern with the moral purpose of such freedom and careful attention to what may be called the calculus of risks to be taken in pursuing inclinations and desires seem to us, who rarely in any deliberate manner weigh such considerations, pedantic and rather absurd. Prudence and pleasure seem opposed to one another, for we rarely think philosophically about happiness. We conceive it as something fitful, temporary, and like the schoolboy's jam tarts: it seems a little outrageous for a philosopher to be zestful in pursuit of what we consider so ephemeral a thing. But Montaigne's conception of happiness was not the jam-tart conception. He loved life. " The opinion which disdaineth our life is ridiculous. For in fine it is our being. It is our all in all." (II, 3.) He was fully alive to the pleasures of the senses and, as the *Essays* often show, he had the ordinary man's enjoy-

ment of bawdy talk. But the attention which has been given to coarse passages has thrown into the shade all the just as noticeable, though less sought for, evidence of Montaigne's scrupulous regard for the spiritual elements of happiness. In his love-affairs he says he was over-conscientious; his mistresses found him faithful "even to the service of their inconstancy." "I have never broken with them as long as I had any hold, were it but by a thread's end; and whatever occasions for it they have given me, I have never broken to the length of contempt and hatred. . . . If I have given them cause to complain of me, it hath been rather for having found in me a love which, compared with our modern fashion, was foolishly conscientious. . . . Moreover in this business I have never let myself go wholly. I pleased myself therein, but did not forget myself. I kept entire, for their service and mine, that little sense and discretion that nature hath bestowed on me. . . . My conscience also was engaged therein even unto excess and incontinency, but never unto ingratitude, treachery, malice, and cruelty. I bought not the pleasure of this vice at any price, and contented myself with its proper and simple cost." (III, 5.) "Love is no food for a gross and clownish hunger," he says in another essay. "I no more acknowledge Venus without Cupid than a motherhood without offspring." (III, 3.) His respect for happiness is a proof in itself of how

far from ephemeral and transitory he considered it; there he undoubtedly differs from people of to-day. To him, even more than to the ancient Epicurean philosophers, happiness was no fevered dream, but life itself felt and lived in all its fullness and strength. In his moderation there is a tireless vitality, a splendid range of understanding of all for which man's mixed nature craves, and an understanding also of what the ancients scarcely realized, the necessity for discrimination in each individual case. The classical ideal of virtue was a fixed one. There was comparatively little change in classical times, and therefore fixed conceptions of virtue and fixed rules of conduct may not have done much harm. But with a more rapidly changing world, fixity of conception involves waste of the possibilities of adaptation and development of the individual in relation to his own problem. Individuality is marred by external discipline seeking to reduce all men to one pattern, regarding the individual as merely a type and ignoring his differences from other individuals. Montaigne, in stressing the need for an inner discipline rather than an outer one, laid the basis of our modern attitude to psychological problems. He realized the heterogeneity and transience of man's impulses, but in his insistence on the importance of self-knowledge and of distinguishing between more and less lasting impulses, he reaches the psychological truth, which is at the bottom

of all conceptions of duty and ideals, that self-mastery and self-expression in the main consist of the control of transient feelings by more durable ones. The individual lives more fully and is more completely himself, not in the momentary impulse, but in the discovery of the degree and scale of his emotions and desires and of the terms on which they can be brought to harmony; and that discovery, involving, as it must, preference, subordination, and hierarchy, *is* moderation.

## CHAPTER V

### *Educational Views*

THE spirit that pervaded Renaissance ideals of education was in essentials the spirit of to-day. It was more idealistic than the modern spirit; it had greater enthusiasms, stronger belief in the teachability of ideals, and as regards love it was shot with Platonic mysticism. But it was the spirit of enlightenment, of reaction against abstract and unnatural conceptions of human life and culture; it sought to free man's intelligence and to enfranchise his instincts.

We take the habit of looking realities in the face so much for granted to-day that it is difficult to realize the intellectual and moral sterility of the mediæval world, and what we owe to those who, awakening from the bondage of arid scholastic abstractions, began to apply to them the newly discovered, long-lost rationalism of the pagan philosophers. The common sense of Montaigne may often seem commonplace until we remember that to those readers he was addressing, it must have come with the magical refreshment of the open air.

When Montaigne started to write his *Essays* the flush of the Revival of Learning was over. The great change instituted by all those forces which we group together and call the Renaissance was well on its way. New conceptions of the physical universe, of the State and its ruler, of the individual's place in society, were already formulated. Machiavelli's *Prince* and Castiglione's *Courtier* had been published before Montaigne was born. We know what part Italian theories of education played in the essayist's own early upbringing. Castiglione's noble book, setting forth the many-sided, characteristically Renaissance ideal of the gentleman in substitution for the purely military conception of feudal times, must have been known to Montaigne; it had been translated into French by Jacques Colin, secretary to Francis I, in 1536. But the Court of Urbino under Duke Guidobaldo and his Duchess, which was glorified in *The Courtier*, was, as Castiglione admits, the beau-ideal of Italian courts; many others were no patterns of noble society, and well deserved the censure for their frivolity and vanity which Castiglione administers to them. It is characteristic of Montaigne, who wrote: "Let us aim at less and pretend less, and perhaps our professions and our actions may be less far apart," that his essays on education are a homelier exposition of Castiglione's fine morals, and that, in giving advice to the young Countess of Gurson and the Lady of Es-

tissac concerning the upbringing of their sons, he should have been occupied less with the pure ideal than with the best practical means of training "a Compleat Gentleman." The result is that, while *The Courtier* is to-day no more than a stately discourse upon an archaic ideal, bound up as it was with a society, that of the court, that has long since ceased to be of any intellectual importance, Montaigne's advice on education, in all its main essentials, is as applicable to-day as it was when it was written.

The dominant note of the Renaissance was individualism, or rather self-emancipation from the tyranny of mediæval despotism, of Church, State, and the intellectual and moral theories which were maintained by and in turn maintained them. The rediscovery of the pagan past restored men's confidence in their own long-persecuted instincts. A new authority, the reasonable mind of man, was put in the place of a dead and meaningless tradition.

*This above all: to thine own self be true,*
*And it must follow, as the night the day,*
*Thou canst not then be false to any man.*

It was this principle of self-assertion and self-dependence which fused the Italian humanists and the Reformers, at any rate in the early days of reform, and Montaigne was but expressing the spirit of his own individualistic times in claiming the

right to make his book a portrait of himself. The *Essays*, in their irregular, tumultuous way, are a mirror of those times, not indeed a polished mirror of their most brilliant aspect, as is *The Courtier*, but in them we can see the many and various influences comprehended within the Renaissance, reverence, amounting to idolatry, for classical tradition and the great men of old, the love of life and beauty, energy and spontaneity, the spirit of liberty, independence, and criticism, all the forces, in short, making for intellectual freedom, moving in the mind of one man of receptive intellect, active curiosity, and varied interests, roving over his experience, throwing light here and light there, yet sometimes casting shadows and obscuring issues, sometimes uncertain of aim, but guided for the most part by a passionate sense of reality and issuing in a stronger and stronger assurance of the value and dignity of ordinary life.

We cannot properly study Montaigne apart from his age; he was essentially a son of it. His views are sometimes no more than superficial reactions to circumstances and, as such, need no special attention. It is a mistake to accept his opinions unquestioningly and to try to present him as always basically consistent. But his general attitude is so sound and his plan of education so unspecialized (he was concerned, as he says, to make not a mind, nor a body, alone, but a man, much less a courtier or any

particular class of citizen) that very little need be cut out of his essays on this subject to make them completely applicable to modern times. This age, like that of the Renaissance, is a great transition period, and all such periods in the world's history have been marked by the same, or similar, extravagances and vulgarity. The Elizabethan age, for all its lustre, was in many ways as vulgar in its pursuit of worldly pleasures and as excessive in its reception of enlightenment as our own.

What Montaigne has to say, directly, on education is contained in three essays, " Of Pedantry " (I, 25), " Of the Education of Children: to the Lady Diana of Foix, Countess of Gurson " (I, 26), and " Of the Affection of Fathers to their Children: to the Lady of Estissac " (II, 8). The essay " On Pedantry " was evidently written first, for in the second essay referred to, Montaigne says that he was encouraged to write more fully about the education of children by someone who had read the first essay. This essay is full of sound criticism of the then prevalent but indiscriminating enthusiasm for learning which, dazzled by scholastic achievement, forgot all else. Humanism had degenerated into pedantry. " We are ever ready to ask," says Montaigne, " doth he know Greek or Latin? Doth he write in prose or verse? But whether he be grown better or wiser, that should be the chief question, and it remains unasked. We should inquire who is

better learned, not who is more learned. We labour only to fill the memory and leave both understanding and conscience empty. Even as birds often go in quest of grain and without tasting it carry it in their bills as a mouthful for their little ones, so do our pedants go about picking up learning from books, but never lodge it further than their lips. . . . Their scholars and their little ones are never a whit the better nourished and fed by it. Thus doth it pass from hand to hand to this end only, to make a parade of it, to entertain others therewith, and with its help to frame tales, like a counterfeit coinage, unprofitable for any other use and employment. . . . We take into our charge the opinions and knowledge of others and that is all; we ought to make them our own. . . . Would I arm myself against the fear of death? It is at Seneca's cost. Would I draw consolation for myself or for another? I borrow the same of Cicero. . . . I love not this derived and begged-for sufficiency. Even though we could be learned with the learning of another, sure I am we can never be wise but with our own wisdom. . . . If our mind go not thereby with a better motion, if our judgment be not thereby sounder, I would as lief that my scholar employed his time in playing tennis: at least his body would be the nimbler. See him return from school after fifteen or sixteen years spent there; no one could be so unfit to put to any employment. The only

gain you can discover in him is that his Latin and Greek have made him prouder and more presumptuous than before he went from home. Whereas he should bring back a full-fraught mind, he brings it back merely puffed with wind. . . . My vulgar Perigordin speech doth very pleasantly term these pedants 'Lettre-ferits' or, so to speak, 'letter-struck,' to whom, as they say, letters have given a blow with a mallet. Verily most often they seem to have sunk even below common sense. For the peasant and the cobbler you may see go simply and naturally about their business, speaking only of what they know; whereas these men, because they would fain raise themselves aloft and swagger with this knowledge which floats on the surface of their brain, are incessantly encumbering and entangling themselves. They utter fine phrases, but leave others to put them in practice: they are well acquainted with Galen, but not at all with the sick man. They will already have stuffed your head full of the laws, but they will not yet have understood the knot of the case." (I, 25.) He goes on to tell a story of a friend of his who, meeting with "a pedant of this sort," pretended to be learned himself and completely took in the man of letters for a whole day by talking a gibberish to him, "a jargon of *galimatias*," but "plentifully sprinkled with appropriate words." How Montaigne and his friend must have chuckled over the joke afterwards! It was no

doubt as fine a sport as Fabian and Sir Toby had with Malvolio. "Yet was he a man of letters and reputation," remarks Montaigne, "and wore a goodly long gown."

"Whereto serveth learning," he asks, "if understanding be not joined to it? Would to God that for the good of our justice these societies of lawyers were as well furnished with understanding and conscience as they are with learning. . . . It is not enough to attach knowledge to the mind, one must incorporate it therewith; and if knowledge change not the mind and better its imperfect state, assuredly it is much better to leave it alone."

Montaigne himself never pretended to be a scholar. He is often found declaring that he was too indolent to pursue thoroughly any one branch of knowledge. He had, he said, a smack of everything in general. "I know there is a science of medicine, of jurisprudence and four parts of mathematics, and I know roughly what they aim at. . . . But as for wading further in, and biting my nails over the study of Aristotle, or persevering in the study of any science, that I have never done."

It was not altogether indolence. Apart from his intellectual scorn of pedantry, Montaigne took pains to dissociate himself from any professional interest in learning and books. There was probably a little snobbishness in that attitude; it was not solely the reflection of the wide Renaissance view.

Montaigne had his vanities. There were moments when he felt doubtful whether writing a book was not a little beneath the dignity of the Lord of Montaigne. He shielded himself by several reminders to his readers that they must on no account look upon him as an author, that he was writing merely as an amateur, to amuse himself and pass the time. Like Congreve, with whom the Elizabethan tradition lingered, he disdained the purely professional label.

But his respect for action was the stronger motive. The feudal tradition lingered in the Renaissance conception of the gentleman, insisting (and, in view of Italy's sacrifice of political freedom for learning, how natural that it should have insisted!) that the gentleman must be above all a man of action, skilled in letters and the arts certainly, but a warrior and statesman as well.[1] The manly virtues were not to be abandoned for intellectual ambitions. "My studies have been to learn how to do, not how to write," says Montaigne. "I have employed all my effort to frame my life. That has been my occupation and my work. I am less a maker of books than of anything else." (II, 37.) This conception speaks again in his opening address to the Countess of Gurson. "Learning," he says, "is much more

[1] "My opinion is that ancient Rome brought forth many men of greater worth, both for peace and war, than that later learned Rome, which, with all her wisdom, ruined herself."

proud to lend her furtherance to the conduct of a war, to command a people, to win the friendship of a prince or of a foreign nation, than she is to frame a dialectical argument in Logic, or to plead an appeal, or to prescribe a receipt for pills." [2] It is, I think, a defect in Montaigne that he does not value learning for its own sake, but regards it solely as a director of conduct. He was too much of a moralist to be interested in science. However, it is perhaps natural that he should here speak as a moralist. He takes for granted that the young Count, who was not yet born when the essay was written, will be brought up as all young men of noble parentage were brought up, to arms and a life of public activity.

The learning he must have must therefore be "not so much for external accomplishments as for those peculiar to himself, and to enrich and adorn himself thereby inwardly," and must be directed to shape "an able rather than a learned man." A matter of great importance, then, was the choice of a tutor. It was desirable to have a tutor with "a well-composed head," rather than "one well stuffed," and moreover a man who from the first taught his pupil to discriminate and to judge

[2] Cf. also his remark, "Were virtue herself incarnate, I think her pulse would beat more strongly marching to an assault than going to dinner." (I, 44.)

for himself. "Let him make his scholar sift all things and harbour nothing in his head by mere authority and upon trust. Let Aristotle's principles be no more principles to him than those of the Stoics or the Epicureans." Then if the scholar embraced the opinions of Xenophon or Plato, those opinions would be no longer Xenophon's or Plato's opinions, but his own. "Truth and reason are common to every man, and are no more his property that spake them first than his that speaks them afterwards." "The bees pillage the flowers now here, now there, but afterwards they make therefrom the honey which is all their own; it is no more thyme nor marjoram." It was the understanding of what the youth studied that mattered, and the mind must move in and about the subject of study if it was to profit therefrom. These pedantical fellows, said Montaigne, could no more instruct without moving or putting the minds into action than could "those two fine dancers Paluel and Pompey" teach anyone to do their "high capers" only by seeing them perform. Who could teach how to manage a horse, or a pike, or a lute, or the voice without any practice, "as these persons would teach us how to judge well and speak well without exercising us either in speaking or in judging"?

We could learn from many things besides books. The knavish trick of a page, a lackey's stupidity, a conversation at table, were all food for our

minds to work upon, for which reason it was good to go about noticing all these and many other things. Travel about the world and in foreign countries was invaluable, not, remarked Montaigne, making a hit at the young Frenchman of his day, in order to be able to come home and report how many paces long the Church of Santa Rotunda was, or what elegant and expensive drawers the courtesan Livia wore, but in order to draw comparisons between the ways of other countries and our own, and to learn to speak foreign languages, " for unless you train the tongue in early youth, it can never adapt itself." A boy should leave home early. It was bad for him to be brought up in his parents' lap. Even the wisest parents were often over-tender to their children, and could not bring themselves to correct or chastize them or see them endure any hardships. Besides, the tutor's authority ought to be supreme, and that was hindered and interrupted by the presence of the parents; also the boy's own position as son of an important house, and the deference which he got from servants in consequence, were not good for him. Young men of this class, and people generally, were too inclined to make themselves known instead of trying to know others. Silence and modesty were qualities " very convenient to civil conversation." A young man should not show himself off, either in talk or manners, and he should beware of thinking that the

most sensible talk is always to be found in the most exalted company. " I have seen that while they at the upper end of a table were discussing the beauty of a tapestry or the flavour of the malvoisie, many fine discourses at the lower end have utterly been lost." Not in the essay on education but elsewhere Montaigne urges the importance of being neither too pompous nor too clever for one's company. " I envy those which can be familiar with the meanest of their followers and vouchsafe to contract friendship and frame discourse with their own tenants. Nor do I like the advice of Plato ever to speak imperiously unto our attendants, be it to men or women servants." " One must lend himself unto those he is with, and sometimes affect ignorance. The learned stumble on this block, and make continual muster and open show of their skill and dispersing their books abroad." He advocates the same principles as regards " living in Rome as Rome does." Let the young man " laugh and frolic and debauch himself with his prince. Even in his debauches I would have him outgo his fellows in vigour and constancy," so that he may learn to avoid evil " neither for lack of strength nor of knowledge, but for lack of will." Montaigne tells a story of a very sober friend of his (" as great a stranger to and as far from riotous disorders as any man in France ") whom he once asked " how many times in his life he had been drunk in Germany,"

and was told " three times." " I have often noted with great admiration," he comments, " the wonderful nature of Alcibiades, whereby he could shape himself so readily to fashions so diverse without prejudice to his health; at one time surpassing the sumptuosity and pomp of the Persians, at another the austerity and frugality of the Lacedæmonians, being as restrained in Sparta as he was voluptuous in Ionia. Such a one I would frame my pupil to be."

The young man should study history " not to learn so much where Marcellus died as why he failed in his duty that he died there." A marvellous enlightenment of judgment was to be got from mixing in the world; in that way things were seen in a better proportion. " We are all confined and packed into ourselves, that our sight is contracted to the length of our nose. When the frost nips the vines in my village, my priest argues therefrom that the wrath of God is threatening the human race, and concludes that the pip is already fallen upon the cannibals." (I, 26.) Or, in the present wars, who was not ready to think that the world was coming to an end, forgetting that many worse revolutions had been seen, and that a thousand other parts of the world were oblivious of what was going on in France? " He on whose head it haileth, thinks all the hemisphere to be in storm and tempest." " This great world is the looking-glass wherein we must look if we would know ourselves from the right

point of view." "In short, I would have it to be my scholar's book. So many humours, sects, judgments, opinions, laws, and customs should teach us to judge sanely of our own. . . . So many commotions of the State and changes of public fortune instruct us to make no great account of our own fortune. So many names, so many victories and conquests buried in oblivion, make ridiculous the hope of eternalizing our names. . . . So many thousands of men laid in their graves before us encourage us not to fear going to join such good company in the other world."

The pupil should be told that the end of study is what it is to know and not to know; "what valour is, what temperance and justice are, what difference there is between ambition and avarice, servitude and submission, licence and liberty . . . what springs move us, and the cause of so many impulses within us." The first discourses should be those that rule the scholar's manners and direct his senses so that he may learn to know himself and how to live well and die well. Let him begin with the sciences which make us free. Here speaks the true humanist, hostile as always to the futile speculations and practices of lingering mediæval sciences, to the lawyers, doctors, and astrologers still enmeshed, despite the boon of culture so hardly won by the Italians of the fifteenth century, in coils of formalism, superstition, and pedantry. Montaigne's eulogy of phi-

losophy which follows is an appeal to the teacher and to the boy whom he teaches to shake off scholastic fetters and to enter into the inheritance of spiritual freedom, the estate of wisdom that is " always clear and bright." This estate, he declares, is not inaccessible. It is a mistake to depict virtue with a " foolish, gloomy, quarrelsome, spiteful visage, menacing and disdainful, and to place her on an unfrequented rock, in the midst of brambles, a bugbear to affright people with." " She is the foster-mother of human pleasures." " She loveth life, she loveth beauty and glory and health." " She is a professed and irreconcilable enemy of bitterness, of trouble, of fear and constraint, having Nature for her guide, and fortune and pleasure for her companions." There is indeed the essence of humanism in this passage.

Too much time can be spent on mere book-learning. " We are taught to live," Montaigne declares, " when our life is spent." " How many men have I seen in my day become foolish by a reckless greediness for learning! " He thought French colleges and schools " besotting " places; " a very prison of captive youth." " Visit them when they are at their lessons; you hear nothing but cries of children being punished and of masters drunk with anger." " Oh wicked and pernicious manner of teaching! " " How much more decent were it to see their schoolhouses and forms strewed with green boughs and flowers than with bloody birch

twigs! Away with violence and compulsion! there is nothing that to my thinking doth more debase and stupefy a well-born nature. If you desire that he should fear shame and punishment, do not harden him to them. Harden him to sweat and to cold, to the wind, to the sun, and to the hazards that he ought to despise. Take from him all softness and niceness in clothing, and lying in bed, in eating and drinking; accustom him to everything; let him not become a pretty boy, a ladies' pet, but lusty and vigorous." Further, all sports and exercises should be part of his study: "It is not a mind, it is not a body, that we are shaping, but a man, and we must not make two of them."

"I condemn all violence in the education of a tender mind that one would train to honour and liberty," he says again, in the last essay on education, that "Of the Affection of Fathers to their Children." "I have seen no other effect of rods but to make minds more cowardly or more maliciously headstrong." "Do we wish to be loved by our children? Do we wish to remove from them all occasion to desire our death? . . . Let us arrange their lives reasonably so far as is in our power. . . . It is folly and injustice to deprive children, when they are old enough, of the familiarity of their fathers, and to wish to maintain towards them an austere and disdainful surliness, hoping thereby to keep them in awe and obedience: for it is a very unprof-

itable farce which maketh fathers irksome to their children, and, what is worse, ridiculous. They have youth and strength in their hands, and consequently the breath and favour of the world, and they receive with mockery these fierce and tyrannical looks from a man who had no more blood left in him, neither in his heart nor in his veins, a very scarecrow for birds. Even if I could make myself feared, I would much rather make myself beloved. There are so many sorts of defects in old age and so much helplessness, it is so subject to contempt, that the best purchase it can make is the affection and love of its kindred." He protested against the miserliness of some fathers towards their grown-up sons, having seen, he said, many young men of good houses given to filching and stealing because their fathers gave them no money. " It is injustice to see an old father, broken and half dead, sitting in a chimney-corner, and alone enjoying wealth which would suffice for the advancement and support of many children," while they for want of means lose their best days and years. He disapproved, too, of the way in which some parents tyrannized over their sons by threatening to ignore them in their wills if the sons were disobedient. " There are people who play with their wills as with apples or rods, to reward or chastise every act of those who have an interest therein."

" Lo, here my lessons," concluded Montaigne.

"He that practises them has better profited by them than he who only knows them. If you see him you hear him, if you hear him you see him." "He shall not so much repeat his lesson as act it." "We shall see whether he shows prudence in his enterprises, whether he has kindness and justice in his behavior, judgment and grace in his speech, courage in his maladies, modesty in his sports, temperance in his pleasures, order in the government of his house, and indifference in his taste, whether it be fish, flesh, wine, or water. . . . The true mirror of our discourses is the course of our lives."

Such views have become axiomatic to-day, but let it be remembered that, though they had been propounded and practised in the century before Montaigne wrote, at such famous Italian schools as those of Mantua and Ferrara under Vittorino da Feltre and Guarino da Verona, it was he who helped to popularize their introduction into western-European teaching. They have been repeated so often since that it is difficult to appreciate our debt to him. The very atmosphere of wholesome common sense created by such views during the last three centuries and more stands between us and our recognition of Montaigne as one of the undoubted founders of modern rational education.

## CHAPTER VI

### *The Last Years*

THE *Essays,* consisting of two books, were first published in 1580. Montaigne prepared and brought out a second edition in 1582, after his return from travelling for over a year in Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. In this edition he made numerous additions to the text, the most interesting of which is the opening paragraph of the fifty-sixth essay of the first book, that " Of Prayers." This was its history. When Montaigne arrived in Rome in the winter of 1580, all his books, including a copy of the *Essays,* were seized in accordance with the regulations of the Index. The interviews which he had with the Master of the Sacred Palace over this matter showed the perfunctoriness, ignorance, and, it should be added, leniency, of those employed in the work of censorship. The Master knew no French and in consequence had nothing to go upon but the report of a French monk who had declared that the *Essays* contained heretical opinions. He himself was evidently far from bigoted, for he was easily satisfied with Montaigne's excuses to the charges

brought against him, and merely requested him to rewrite whatever he should see to be " in bad taste " and too free-spoken, and particularly to take out of the book the word " chance." Montaigne describes the interviews in his " Diary of Travel." He acknowledged, he says, some things, " as that I had used the word ' chance,' that I had mentioned heretic poets, that I had excused Julian the Apostate, that I had said that he who prayed should be exempt from vicious inclinations at the time; item, that I considered anything beyond simple death cruelty; item, that a child should be brought up to do everything; and other such things, stating that such were my opinions and that I had expressed them without knowing them to be errors." " In other words I denied that the censor had understood my conception." " They seemed very satisfied with me," he concluded; and beyond the opening sentence of the essay referred to, in which he professes his allegiance to the Church, " wherein I was born, and out of which I purpose not to die," he did not amend the *Essays* as requested; on the contrary, by the additions which he constantly made, the opinions to which Rome had taken exception became more and more positively expressed.[1] " I speak truth, not my

[1] The *Essays* were, however, put upon the Index in 1676, nearly a century later, and during the greater part of the reign of Louis XIV publication of them was forbidden in France.

bellyful, but as much as I dare speak," he says in the second essay of the third book ("Of Repentance"), "and I dare a little more as I grow older." Montaigne cannot be accused of cowardice. His onslaughts against cruelty and superstition, against the Spanish brutalities in South America (contained characteristically enough in the essay "On Coaches," (III, 6)), against the pusillanimities of the French king, Henry III, show him to have been one of the most courageous and outspoken men of his times. His political association with the Church, and dissociation from the party of Reform came from no lack of courage: as the *Essays* prove, he abhorred the excesses of Rome. But, despite his independence, he was conservative and opposed to furthering the political ambitions of the new sect. The abuses of the Church had given rise to the Reform movement. Montaigne recognized this and, like many other tolerant men of his day, he sought for the removal of those abuses and the understanding of the spirit of toleration rather than the establishment of a second religion within the realm. The Huguenots were as cruel, intriguing, and intolerant, as were the Guises and the League, and over and over again in the *Essays* Montaigne pronounces against them and deplores the newfangled dogmas and the troubles which they have brought into the State. His tolerance was detached from religious considerations; he aimed at teaching a humane

moral above dogmas and creeds. "Our religion is designed to root out vices, but it shelters, fosters, and provokes them." (II, 12.) Absolute certainty in religious matters was not to be reached, such was his conviction, but social peace was attainable, if men would only learn to live happily and thereby escape the evils which they brought upon themselves by lack of moderation.

Montaigne's stay in Rome was cut short in 1581 by news of his election as Mayor of Bordeaux. A letter from the King (Henry III) commanding him to accept the post gave him no choice but to do so. Before starting on his travels in the summer of 1580, Montaigne had been received in audience by Henry, to whom he had sent a copy of the just published *Essays,* and had been complimented upon his book,[2] despite the fact that Chapter 21 of the second book, "Against Idleness,"[3] had been evidently

[2] The King, however, admitted that he had not read all of it!

[3] "The Emperor Vespasian, lying sick of the disease of which he died, omitted not to endeavour to understand the condition of the Empire; and even on his bed incessantly dispatched many affairs of consequence; and his physician, chiding him for this, as for a thing hurtful to his health, 'An emperor,' he said, 'should die standing.' . . . And kings ought often to be put in mind of this to make them feel that this great charge which is given them of the commandment over so many men is no

directed against the King for his dissipations while the country was ravaged with civil war.

The appointment was in the interests of the two kings. The League was the greatest enemy of both. Henry of Navarre had placed himself at the head of the army of Reform in 1576, with a view to moderating its policy, as he eventually succeeded in doing. Henry III's representative in Guyenne, Matignon, was a moderate man, and Montaigne, as Mayor, worked in close collaboration with him against the insurgent and fanatical League which the Guises controlled. Navarre and Montaigne were friends through the de Foixs, cousins of the one and neighbours of the other. Montaigne's affection for the Béarnais king speaks in many passages of the *Essays*. Their membership of opposite camps, and on certainly one occasion of opposite armies, did not prevent frequent meetings and discussion. Henry of Navarre with his court twice lodged at the château. Montaigne has an entry in his journal, December 19th, 1584: "The King of Navarre

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idle charge, and that there is nothing may so justly distaste a subject from putting himself in pain and danger for the service of his prince as to see him meanwhile degrading himself to frivolous and vain occupations. . . . I know one who would much rather choose to be beaten than to sleep while others fought for him." (Montaigne is here referring to Henry of Navarre.)

came to see me at Montaigne, where he had never been before. He remained there two days, served by my people, without any of his officers; he allowed no assay (i.e., of food, against poison), and slept in my bed. He had with him Messieurs " etc. . . .

The first term of Montaigne's mayoralty (1581–3) was comparatively uneventful. It is on record, however, that he instituted and presided over a Commission of Inquiry into the Jesuits' maladministration of the care of foundling children and transferred the charge to a municipal body, a courageous proceeding in view of the power of the Jesuits in Bordeaux. We know also from the *Memoirs* of de Thou (afterwards the Minister of Henry IV and promoter of the Edict of Nantes), that Montaigne was present at the opening session of the new Court of Justice for Guyenne which was convened in January, 1582, at Bordeaux, and entertained with great hospitality at the Mairie. De Thou says that Montaigne was " a man of great frankness, disliking all constraint and entering into no cabal. He was very learned in contemporary history, but especially in that of Guyenne, his own country, which he knew perfectly." Montaigne was re-elected Mayor for a second time in 1583, and during this period he showed great activity both in military action against the League armies and in acting as an intermediary between Henry III and his brother-in-law of Navarre. In 1584 Henry III's re-

maining brother and heir, the Duc d'Alençon, died and Henry of Navarre became the heir to the throne. The latter's first visit in royal state to the château took place in this year and the effect of this event on future policy was no doubt discussed.

A frightful plague broke out in Bordeaux in 1585; details of it are given in the twelfth essay of the third book. Even the country-side was infected, and Montaigne and his family, a miserable caravan, wandered about the country, trying to avoid the infection which had evidently shown itself at the château. The caravan he refers to consisted of his wife and daughter, his mother, and the servants. There is a letter from him dated Libourne, July 30th, 1585, where he excuses himself from going to Bordeaux, as he had evidently been requested to do, in order to be present at the election of his successor. Considering the plague-stricken state of the town, and the pure formality of summoning his presence at the election, it is not surprising that he refused, and no one at the time thought of condemning him for avoiding unnecessary danger. But in the last century an attempt was made to prove from this his neglect of municipal duties; the charge, however, is absurd and not worth attention.

When the plague was over, Montaigne retired to prepare a third edition of the *Essays*, which was to contain an additional book. The fighting at this

time was incessant, and bands of pillagers infested the neighbourhood. From the beginning of the wars Montaigne had refused to take measures for the protection of his home and estate upon the principle that "Things sealed up solicit a thief (to break them open)." "It may be," he says, "that among other causes it is facility of access that serves to protect my house from the violence of our civil wars. Defence attracts assault, and mistrust, offence. I have weakened the soldiers' designs by depriving their exploit of risk and of all means of military glory. . . . My house is closed to no one that knocketh there. It hath no other guardian but a porter . . . who serveth not so much to defend my door as to open it more courteously and graciously. I have no watch nor sentinel but what the stars keep for me." (II, 15.) His principles, or his personality perhaps, were rewarded. His moderation naturally made him a suspicious character. As he says, "I incurred the inconveniences that moderation bringeth. To the Ghibelline I was a Guelf: to Guelf a Ghibelline." But his bearing and speech were so frank that those who intended to rob him were disarmed. He tells the story of two such encounters with evilly disposed bands, one of which, well mounted and armed, under pretext of being pursued by an enemy took possession of his court-yard. "As I ever do," says Montaigne, "I took the most natural and the most simple way and bade them

enter." The captain was evidently much taken aback and for a while could not make up his mind what to do, his men keeping their eyes upon him all the time in waiting for his orders. " He hath often since declared that my countenance and my frankness had wrested his treachery from his hands." (III, 12.) He called for his horse and was off, followed by his men. On another occasion, as Montaigne was journeying he was surprised by troops who pulled him from his horse, rifled his boxes; while his horses, equipage, and such possessions as he had were distributed among the robbers. Then followed a long, inconclusive dispute as to the ransom, after which he was set on a lame jade and carried off as a prisoner. After a very short while, however, " a sudden and very unexpected alteration " took place. His property was re-collected and given back to him and he was set at liberty. The chief robber told him that he could thank " his countenance and his freedom and firmness of speech " for his deliverance.

Montaigne was glad to be rid of his mayoral duties, and to return to what he always insisted was a man's principal charge; namely, his own particular conduct. " Not that," he said — and his detractors have overlooked this in bringing charges of egoistic indifference against him — " one should refuse to give one's attention, activity, words, sweat, and, if need be, one's blood " to a duty one has undertaken, but we should not so involve our

innermost selves in what we do that we cannot view those actions detachedly and unpassionately. We should try to distinguish the skin from the shirt. " I see some who transform and transubstantiate themselves into as many new shapes and new beings as they undertake offices: and who emprelate themselves even to the heart and entrails." Such people, he continued, could never tell the difference between the salutations given to them as individuals and the respect they received as officials. He himself made no such mistake. " The Mayor and Montaigne have ever been two." " I cannot engage myself so deeply and so absolutely. When my will gives me to any party, it is not with so violent a bond that my understanding is thereby infected." He could see the good points in his enemies. " A good piece of work loseth not its grace by pleading against me." Dare we not say, he remarks ironically, that a thief has a good leg if he happens to have one, or, he adds, " If she be a strumpet, must she needs have a stinking breath? " It was not easy, he admitted, to attain unto such detachment. But it was easier to pull oneself up from being overcome in the beginning than to rescue oneself after having allowed oneself to be overwhelmed. " I feel betimes those little winds which come to try me and rustle within me, the forerunners of the storm." Moreover what stupid things people in the first instance quarrelled over! " What ruin did our last Duke of Burgundy

incur from a quarrel about a cart-load of sheepskins?" "We guide our affairs in their beginning and hold them at our mercy, but afterwards, when they are set in motion, it is they that guide and carry us along, and we have to follow them."

All these extracts are taken from one of the last essays of the third book: "On Controlling One's Will." It was evidently written during and after his mayoralty, when he was turning over in his mind sundry criticisms that had been made as to the way in which he had managed affairs. "Some say of this my municipal employment that I demeaned myself therein like a man who bestirs himself too lazily, and is of a languid temper; and they are not altogether far from the apparent truth. I strive to keep my mind and thoughts in repose. . . . They say, likewise, that this office of mine passed leaving no mark or trace behind. That is well." No doubt he seemed slow and inactive to them, so he meditated, when the fault with the rest of the world was that it was doing too much! To his knowledge he had neglected no necessary duty. Men were so accustomed to noise and agitation that "kindness, moderation, equality, constancy, and such quiet and obscure qualities" passed unnoticed. "Sickness is felt, health little or not at all." "I had no care but to preserve and continue, which are hidden and insensible processes." "Is there any man who desires

to be sick in order to see his physician at work? And should not that physician be well whipped who, to put his art in practice, should wish the plague to infect us? I was never possessed with that iniquitous and too common humour to wish that the confusion and distemper of that city's affairs should exalt and bring honour to my government." What praise is this, he exclaims, quoting Cicero, which may be fetched out of the shambles? The whole of this chapter might be read with advantage at Geneva when the statesmen of the League of Nations meet to compete with one another for glory.

The completed *Essays* were ready for publication in 1588, and Montaigne took them to be printed in Paris. It was then that he made the acquaintance of Marie de Gournay, a remarkable young woman of twenty-four who had been a passionate admirer of the *Essays* since she had first read them at the age of eighteen. She was the eldest daughter of a Picardy gentleman who had held office in the Royal Household; when, at his death, his widow, with small means and a large family, retired to Picardy, Marie, marooned in the depths of the country and hating domesticity, plunged fiercely into books. Her mother insisted on household duties and proffered hellebore as a sedative, but nothing could quench Marie's passion for the life of the mind. Alone, without encouragement

and without masters, she snatched time from needlework to teach herself Latin, and some Greek, and to study history, geometry, physics, and alchemy. The *Essays* came upon her as a light from heaven. They had not then become famous; her own judgment discovered their value, a proof of her genuine intellectuality, for one would scarcely expect them to appeal particularly to youth. But in Marie de Gournay they awoke a singular responsiveness. She declared that from the first moment she felt a fatal affinity with the essayist. For years the longing to meet Montaigne possessed her. By contrivance or chance she was in Paris with her mother when Montaigne went there in 1588. She wrote him a letter that brought him to visit her immediately. From that day she became his "*fille d'alliance*," and she ever afterwards used that title, being as proud of it, she says, as if she had been mother to the Muses themselves.

Montaigne was equally proud of his conquest, and was easily drawn to go and stay with the mother and daughter in Picardy. The relationship between the elderly philosopher and his young disciple was undoubtedly romantic, in the sense that Marie's whole nature was as violent as it was intellectual, and Montaigne became her god. It is difficult not to connect her with the following passage in the *Essays*, especially as we know that Montaigne attended the Blois Parliament about this time. "When I came

from the Parliament of Blois, I had, just before, seen a girl in Picardy, in order to testify the ardour of her promises and also her constancy, give herself with the bodkin which she wore in her hair four or five sharp stabs in the arm which tore the skin so that the blood came in good earnest." (I, 14.) The only direct reference to Marie is at the end of Chapter 17 of the second book, and was put into the 1588 edition when Montaigne had returned from Germany to Paris.

" I have taken pleasure in publishing in many places the hopes that I have of Marie de Gournay le Jars, my daughter by adoption and certes loved by me far more than paternally and welcomed by me in my retreat and solitude as one of the best parts of my own being. I no longer look to anyone in the world but her. If adolescence can give presage, her mind shall some day be capable of the noblest things, and amongst others of the perfection of that most sacred friendship to which we do not read that her sex has ever yet been able to attain. The sincerity and solidity of her character are already sufficient for this: her affection towards me is more than superabundant, and such indeed as nothing more could be wished unto it except that the apprehension which she has of my approaching end, my years being fifty-five when she met me, might trouble her less cruelly. The judgment she made of my first *Essays,* being a woman, and of this

age, and so young and alone in her district, and the wonderful vehemence wherewith for so long she loved and desired me, merely through the esteem she had conceived from them for me long before having seen me, are a matter very worthy of consideration."

To Montaigne Marie was no doubt a great discovery. Apart from certain great Renaissance ladies and classical heroines, he looked upon women as his age and the Middle Ages before him had always looked upon them, as incapable of intellectual passions and friendships, and in his *Essays* he constantly lets fly the familiar sarcasms, and enjoys telling the story of the obstinate old woman who though ducked in a pond would not be deprived of her love for the last word. But though he cannot resist these traditional sallies, nor an attempt now and again to depict himself as hen-pecked by his wife, he admits his openness to conviction on the vexed subject, and at the end of the essay "Upon some verses of Virgil" he makes amends by good-humouredly declaring: "I say that males and females are cast in the same mould: instruction and custom excepted, there is no great difference between them. . . . Ill may the kiln call the oven black." Marie, who was a terrific feminist, must have treasured this sign of grace in Montaigne, when in later years she wrote her diatribe "*Grief des dames.*" "*Sur une fenêtre,*" she wrote acidly, "*rien n'est plus semblable au chat*

*que la chatte.*" Marie herself had no great love for certain classes of her sex: she dipped her pen in special gall whenever, and that was frequently, she wrote about the courtesans!

Montaigne at fifty-five looked upon himself as an old man. The disease from which he suffered was exhausting, but throughout the *Essays*, and long before any symptoms of the stone had appeared, he habitually refers to his stricken years, and to his life as well-nigh over. During his last years events in France moved fast and furiously to the political climax he hoped for. The Duke of Guise was assassinated in 1588; Henry III in the year after that. Henry of Navarre was soon to overcome the League completely and to win his throne. Letters from Montaigne to Henry in 1590 show his strong sympathy and allegiance, and his intention, if health permitted, of meeting the King in Paris. But that meeting never came to pass. Montaigne died at his château on September 13th, 1592, at the age of fifty-nine, not of his old enemy the stone, but of a quinsy. He was buried first at Montaigne, but his body was afterwards removed to the chapel of the Feuillants at Bordeaux, whence, after a fire in 1871, the sarcophagus, with recumbent statue in armour, was removed to the vestibule of Bordeaux. Some authorities say that Marie de Gournay, apprised of Montaigne's death and of his last wish that his "*fille d'alliance*" should take charge of his papers, rushed

headlong across France to the château. Others say that her fifteen months' visit to the widow and daughter did not take place until later, after she had supervised the 1595 edition of the *Essays* in Paris for the press. Two copies of the 1588 edition in quarto had been prepared by Montaigne, the margins loaded, in his difficult handwriting and more curious spelling, with additional matter, and one copy apparently fuller than the other. Madame de Montaigne presented the first to the Community of the Feuillants, and it is now religiously guarded in the Bordeaux Public Library. The other copy, after being collated with the first by Pierre de Brach, the poet and friend of Montaigne, at Madame de Montaigne's request, was then sent to Marie de Gournay to be used by her as a basis for the 1595 edition. This appeared in folio, with a preface by Marie, very long and full of tropical praise, but well worth reading for the information that it gives of her editorial labours, including translations of the Latin quotations, and for the light that it throws on contemporary criticisms of the *Essays*. In addition to the criticisms that have been always made concerning Montaigne's " talking too much of himself," and his licence, it was his " Gascon phrases," his abuse of Latinism, and his careless syntax that were the chief objects of attack. Marie's defence, as one would expect, allows no weakness in her deity. " All is perfect in this book . . . the gods and the

goddesses have given him their language." "Montaigne wrote this book, Apollo conceived it," she had inscribed on the title-page. In 1635, then an old woman of seventy, she brought out another magnificent edition dedicated to the Cardinal de Richelieu. During the intervening years she had fought like the Amazon she was for Montaigne's reputation, engaging herself, at the cost of slander and ridicule, with a number of critics who attacked the essayist's faith, style, his provincialisms, and other idiosyncrasies. Her whole life and her small fortune were devoted to her father's memory and to ideas. Marie de Gournay was undoubtedly a personage. Purely intellectual, her tempestuous temperament outpoured itself in "superabundant" and interminable defence of an age that was rapidly passing away, of writers and styles of writing that were no longer held, as she held them, in idolatry. Against the incoming purists, the school of Malherbe, she fought in the last ditch for "le grand Ronsard" and the lost causes of metaphors, diminutives, and the old French idiom. The philosopher of moderation had no more immoderate disciple! Yet, despite the continual public mockery at her expense (she was an old maid, she lived with a faithful servant and a cat, and she wore false teeth), and the practical jokes played on her, she was held in high honour by intellectual society, and the Académie française, absorbed in philological dis-

cussion, met at her house. Richelieu pensioned her, Balzac was among her friends. She died in 1645, in her eightieth year. Her life had stretched from the late Renaissance to the " grand siècle " of Louis XIV.

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8 Of the art of Conference.
9 Of Vanity.
10 Of Controlling one's Will.
11 Of Cripples.
12 Of Physiognomy.
13 Of Experience.

## A NOTE ON THE TYPE IN WHICH THIS BOOK IS SET

*This book is set on the Linotype in Garamond, a modern rendering of the type first cut in the sixteenth century by Claude Garamond (1510–1561). He was a pupil of Geofroy Tory and is believed to have based his letters on the Venetian models although he introduced a number of important differences, and it is to him we owe the letter which we know as Old Style. He gave to his letters a certain elegance and a feeling of movement which won for their creator an immediate reputation and the patronage of the French King, Francis I.*

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